

TEXAS TALBERT

Buck Talbert had ridden a long and dusty trail from Texas, hazing a horse herd to the ranch he had bought near Missouri City. He hadn't even seen his property yet when he had to use his fists to settle an argument in the Custer Bar, and realized he had bought into trouble.

His fight with the owner of the Circle 8 was part of that trouble. His failure to get a loan from the town banker, crippled old Deacon Stebbins, was another piece of it. Jay Rolling's horse rustlers made up a good share.

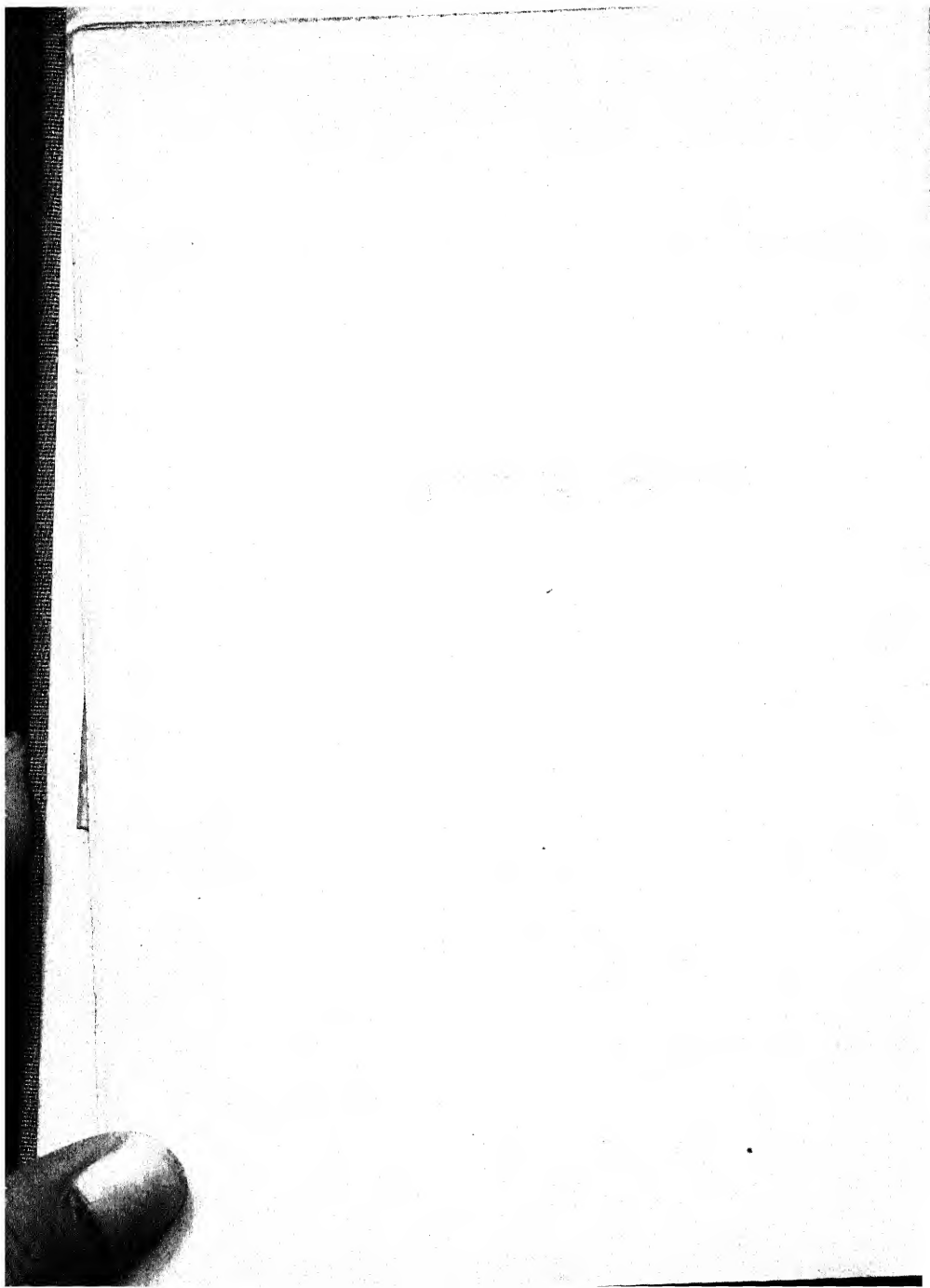
Added together, they totaled up to emptied pistols and red splotches against Montana's snowdrifts.



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TEXAS TALBERT





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By

LEE THOMAS

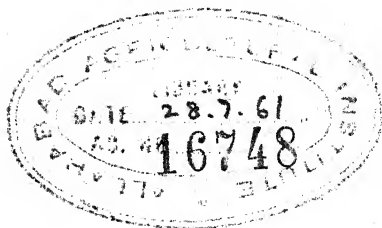


PHOENIX PRESS

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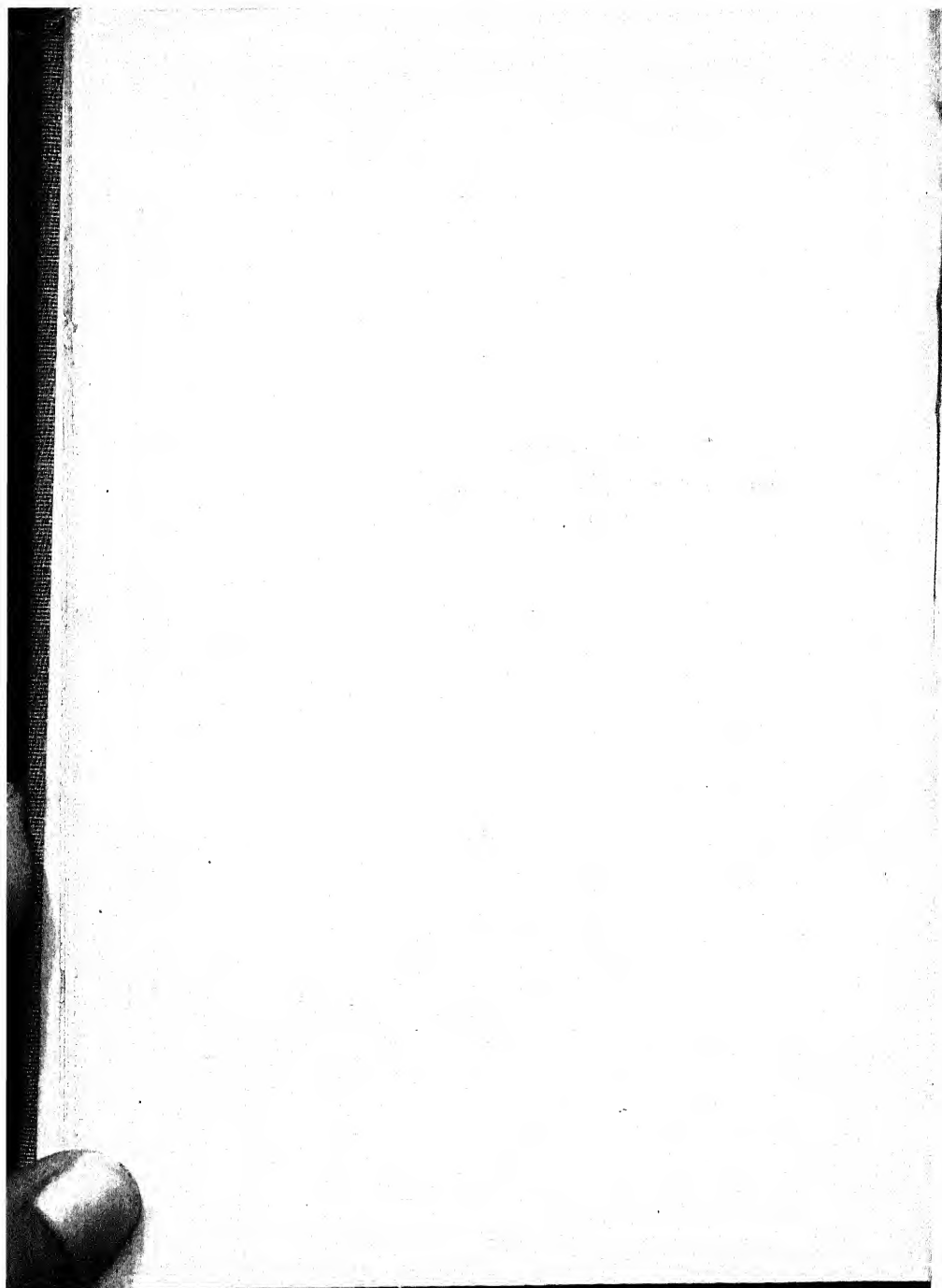
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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*All characters,
names and incidents in this book
are fictitious.*



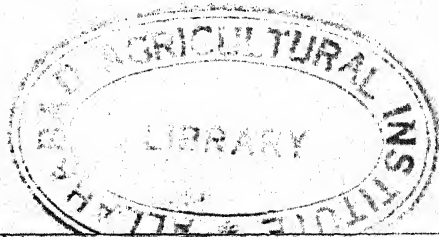


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ONE

There were two men drinking in the Custer Bar when Buck Talbert came in, beating the traildust from himself with his Stetson. He was a tall man and he was only twenty-eight, but when you looked at him you would have thought he was older. Vicksburg and Lookout Mountain—and those other scattered battles of the Civil War—had marked his gaunt face with a deliberate harshness.

These men turned and looked at him. The older was heavy and stout, but there was no surplus flesh on him. He wore run-over boots and his chaps and jacket were marked by brush. His face was stout, heavy, and his eyes were deep. He was silent as Buck came to the bar, and Buck saw he was measuring him silently.



The other said, "You make a lot of dust, stranger." He was a thin man and he wore two guns.

Buck said, "Long trail, fellow."

The bartender asked, "A drink?"

"Make mine beer," said Buck. He glanced at the pair. "Drink with me?"

The older man said, "Thanks, mister, and I'll take a beer too, Casey."

"Rye," said the thin man.

Buck said, "To Missouri River range," and raised his mug. The beer was cold and took the dust away and left a freshness. They drank and then the older man said, "I'm Pike Mooney and this is Hump Quigley. I own the Circle 8 Outfit down the river a ways, and Hump here is my foreman. Newcomer here, ain't you?"

"Texas," said Buck.

Hump Quigley asked: "Ridin' through, fellow?"

Buck was silent, then. He turned his empty mug between strong, thin fingers. Finally he said, "No, I'm settling. Ten miles back of me my riders are hazing my horse herd this direction. I bought a place here from a Pueblo sales outfit; I think it was called the Trander place."

Pike Mooney glanced at Hump Quigley. Then he said, "Well, I'll be damned, Hump! So old man Trander sold his place, and he wouldn't sell it to

me." The heavy man looked at Buck Talbert. "How many head you bringing in, fellow?"

"Around four thousand."

"You got any feed? Any hay? This ain't Texas, fellow. You gotta feed stock up here—this snow gets damned deep and a cow cain't rustle her feed."

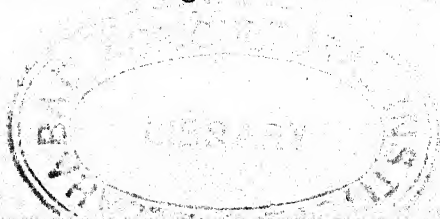
"No, but a horse can."

"Sometimes," corrected Pike Mooney. His voice was harsh and savage now. Hump Quigley had turned and hooked his elbows back against the bar and Buck saw that his two hands hung seemingly indifferent over his two guns. Buck had a cold feeling somewhere along his spine, as he wondered just what this was all about.

"Maybe this will be an easy winter," said Buck. "And besides, if I remember right, there was some hay sold with the ranch when I bought it off'n old Trander in Pueblo."

"Not enough to pull through four thousand head of broncs," said Hump Quigley.

"They'll come through," said Buck. The trail had been long and it had been dusty. It had twisted across Colorado into Wyoming and across that territory and into Montana. He remembered the Wind River, and the Yellowstone; he remembered tall buttes splashed with nature's wild colors, and he remembered dust and long hours under dark mid-



night skies. Now this was working on him, pushing his raw nerves. "And if they don't, what the hell is it to you, Quigley, or you, Mooney?"

Quigley said, "I fought at Bull Run, fellow. The first time, and we took it from you rebels. Montana's a north country and we don't need you reb yellow-bellies—"

Buck Talbert hit him hard.

Mooney said, "Damn it, none of that!" and jerked Buck around by the arm. Buck planted his boots wide and hit, and Mooney lost his hold. Buck had his .45 out then, hard and quick and tough, and Quigley settled down, blood on his lips, and held his gun halfway free, debating on whether to pull it.

"Don't pull it," said Buck, "unless you aim to use it!"

Mooney was dazed. He shook his bull-like head and made no move for his weapon. He spat blood and said, "You act fast, fellow. And what did you say your name was, anyway?"

"I didn't say. But it's Buck Talbert." Buck flicked his glance to the big man and then sent it rifling back to Hump Quigley who pulled his hand back, empty. "That's right, Quigley."

Hump Quigley was silent, his eyes sharp.

Mooney said heavily, "You got off to a bad start, Talbert. You see, I run horses here, too, and the

Trander place is right in the middle of my range, you might say."

"Government land?" asked Buck.

Mooney nodded. "But mine by right of settlement."

"Squatters' rights are shot to hell," said Buck. "The interior department ruled two years ago that government land was open range free to whoever cared to run graze on it."

"This is Montana," said Mooney ponderously. "This ain't Texas. Texas is more or less settled, and boundaries are already stationed. But up here a man gets hold of range, and he hangs on to it—and the law be damned!"

Buck nodded and murmured, "We'll see."

Mooney was quiet and Quigley looked at his hands. Quigley was dark and drawn, and already his thoughts were running ahead and building up, taking form and feel and taste. He did not forget easily. Mooney stirred and his heavy shoulders moved deliberately. "That makes two of you to fight."

"Yes."

"Deacon Stebbins, the banker. He runs cattle south of my place and all around in the hills. He needs Missouri River bottom to raise alfalfa and native bluejoint for winter feed."

"Two's company," said Buck, "and three's a crowd." He turned and walked outside, leaving the two watching him as he left. The tang of fall was in the Montana air and this was sharp against him. He thought, *I wanted to get away from trouble and here I bought right into it, it looks like*, and he lifted his eyes to the hills that rimmed the town on all sides except the north. This was northern range, and it was good range, but soon the clouds would see to the snow, and that would make it necessary that he feed his mares some, in addition to their rustling back on the ridges where the wind would blow free from the bunchgrass and buckbrush.

He looked at his knuckles and saw that they were skinned. A woman's voice said, "Hit somebody, cowboy?"

He regarded her gravely—too gravely, in fact—and saw she was about twenty-four, or maybe less. She was a small girl, too, not much over five feet, and her hair was brownish-red—a glistening auburn mass. Her cream-colored Stetson hung on her back by its throat strap. She wore buckskin—a buckskin jacket with a silk blouse, a split buckskin riding-skirt; her boots were Justins. There were freckles across the bridge of her nose and she laughed easily, he figured.

"Beer glass," he said. "Kicked me."

She smiled and said, "Watch out for these broncs, around here, then, if you can't dodge a beer glass. I'm looking for Pike Mooney. Do you know him?"

Buck gestured toward the door behind him. "In there."

"He would be," she said. "Hope a beer glass doesn't kick him."

She went into the saloon. Buck moved down the street, working toward the log office a block away that carried the legend: "Deputy-sheriff, clerk and recorder, U.S. land office." *She was a pretty girl, too damned pretty*, he thought. He went into the log building.

A short, blocky man was working at a desk. He looked up, his eyes shrewd and appraising. "Something, sir?"

Buck said, sitting down, "Texas men aren't welcome on Montana range, I guess?" He wore an enigmatic smile. The big man wore a star and Buck looked at it and read: "Deputy sheriff, Musselshell County, Territory of Montana." He was, Buck saw, a hard man, and because of his hardness, he was just and he would ride a lonely trail because of that. "I'm Buck Talbert. I bought the Trander outfit from a Pueblo, Colorado land company."

"Oh," said the man. He turned to his files and pulled out a drawer. "Yes, here's your papers—

they came from Helena a few days ago." He skimmed through the sheaf of onion skins. "You paid cash, it says, and your brand has been registered at Helena, the Quarter Circle Lazy S on the right shoulder. Here's a letter that came from the territorial brand registrar, too." He tossed it to Buck.

Buck read, "Martin James, Missouri City, Montana," and asked, "Are you Martin James?" The deputy nodded. Buck opened the envelope and read the letter and murmured, "So the brand registrar wants me to change my horse brand to the left shoulder, huh, because Mooney's Circle 8 also brands on the right shoulder. Well, I'll brand my next crop of colts that way, but I got to leave the brands on the mares and the colts for this year the same."

"No, you can't re-brand the mares very well," agreed James. He leaned back in his chair, his lids drawn down in thought. "What happened to your hand, if it's any of my business?"

"Quigley," said Buck.

James asked, "You hit him?"

"He pressed me," said Buck. He added, "Down in the Custer Bar."

James seemed pressed by a great heaviness. "Well, it started soon off and right off, huh? Mooney was with him, I reckon?"

"Yes."

James got to his feet and walked to the window, a man moving with a quickness, a deceptive lightness in spite of his thick bulk. "I guess you know what you're moving into then, Talbert," he said. "Mooney runs horses too, and he runs good stock—but Deacon Stebbins and his N Bar 5 are pressing Mooney close, and Deacon Stebbins'll put the weight against you, too."

Buck asked, "Stebbins is the banker, ain't he?"

James said, "Come here," and Buck went to the open window. He heard the sounds then—they were distant and far and lay thinly against the air. They came across the raw, sun-beaten, weather-whipped frontier cow-town and gave it life and movement and color.

"A violin," said Buck.

James stepped back and went to his desk and Buck listened. The pitch was rising, coming up and up, building and adding, sweet and trembling against the harsh Montana day. The song had depth and feeling and came out of trouble and anguish and its background was far behind it.

Buck looked inquiringly at Martin James. "Who's playing that fiddle?"

"Deacon Stebbins," said the deputy sheriff.

Buck looked at the bank. The music was coming from there. This building was made of logs, thick

and solid and of two stories. Along the back came a stairway that ran up, and the front of the bank on the lower floor was faced with windows.

Buck said, "He lives upstairs, huh?" and James nodded. Buck looked at the upstairs' windows and saw the lace curtains there. "Is he married?"

James shrugged. "Not now, Talbert. His daughter, Nita, keeps house for him." He turned on his chair, a somber man. "Hell, she's a beauty. She's like the scarlet flash of leaves in the fall; she's tender, and she's fire and destruction." The mellow notes of the violin were throbbing across the vibrant distance. "That fiddle—it cost thousands, I guess."

Buck waited.

Finally James said, "He used to be a concert violinist. Now he's crippled and pulled together with pain. He seldom comes downstairs; he stays up there, and he plays. His fingers took to stiffness, I understand, and he had to leave the platform."

"How long's he been here?"

"Ten years, maybe more. Nita was a small girl when he came. But don't get him wrong, Talbert. He may be tight with arthritis and rheumatism, but those fingers of his are alive and so are his eyes; they miss nothing."

The violin lifted to crescendo, then died.

Buck was silent as he added all this. "Well, if

everything is in order, I guess I'll ride out to the Trander place and look it over." He stopped at the door. "Mooney was mentioning he wanted to buy the Trander place, but Trander wouldn't sell to him, or something along that line."

"Trander hated Mooney," said James. "When he went back East to stay he listed his ranch, and said to be sure not to sell it to Mooney or anybody who represented him. Trander left some stock on the place, too, you know: a few head of cattle and some wild broomtails, over across the Missouri in the badlands. They're listed here in your deed. I suppose you intend to raise broncs for the cow-outfits and for the cavalry at Fort Keogh and Fort Union and Fort Assinboine?"

"That's it."

James said, "Good luck."

Buck halted again, "Indians?"

"Quite a few," said James. "This is Crow country, here, with the reservation around Billings, but they wander more or less. The Gros Ventre and the Rocky Boys are north in the little Rockies, and the Sioux are on the Poplar reservation." His eyes were sharp. "Of course, you'll lose some horses to them, Talbert, but don't run them, or they'll break against you."

"Came through Wyoming," said Buck, "and they



weren't too settled down there, but I guess Custer has things more or less in hand from the Black Hills."

"Can't tell about an Indian . . . or a woman."

Buck said, "So long," and left. He went to his horse and found the stirrup and rode out. When he passed the bank, he glanced up: the man in the window drew back, and Buck had just a momentary glimpse of him. But one of the man's hands still lay against the drape, and Buck saw that it was small and gnarled, although he could not see the man who had pulled back into the shadows.

Deacon Stebbins, he thought.

Pike Mooney and Hump Quigley stood in front of the Custer Bar and watched him ride out. Mooney nodded, almost absent-mindedly, and Buck lifted his reins slightly, and looked at Hump Quigley.

Quigley gave no sign of recognition. He was dark and thin against the sky and there was blackness in him.

TWO

When Buck Talbert reached the ridge, the tumbling range lay below him. He pulled in and rolled a cigarette and watched. To the north, a mile or so away, the Missouri River rolled, carrying its black muddy waters, carrying its mystery and silt and loneliness. The land was level on the south side of the river, marked by green fields and buckbrush and cottonwoods, and here were the haystacks and feed corrals of Deacon Stebbins' N Bar 5 iron.

Buck thought of Tin Ear Jackson, his Negro rider back with the herd, and said to himself, *Tin Ear'll string a line across there sure as hell and catch some channel catfish. . . .* Beyond the Missouri which was over a half-mile wide, were the northern badlands, the base of the Little Rockies, the blue mountains that towered to the north, pointed against

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the fall sky. Here, according to Martin James, were the Trander horses, and Buck wondered how the horses had come to swim the river, and what they were doing over on that range. . . .

Later he was to find out how they got there.

The wagon trail ran along the base of the southern hills. According to what James had said, Deacon Stebbins ran his cattle back to the south, feeding on the bottomland when the snow and freezing cold came. The bunchgrass and buffalo-grass on the hills had burned brown, but there was plenty of it and Buck knew it was good feed. The sun had cured it and put strength into it.

According to the land plot, the distance from the Trander ranchhouse to Missouri City was about fifteen miles. And when Buck was about six miles out of town, he came to a fork in the road. Here the road broke and one strand ran southeast, cutting into the hills. At this point, the buckbrush and bullberry trees were thick, and a rider spurred out of these, horse crashing.

Buck pulled in and waited, hand on his gun. Then he saw that the rider was a woman, and he took his hand up, smiling as she pulled the horse around, quieted him.

He said, "Playing Buffalo Bill, ma'am?"

Her eyes were dark and savage; she looked at him

and said coldly, "Keep your funny remarks to yourself, stranger!" She jerked the gray around and said thinly, "Damn you, Toby! Damn you!"

Buck settled back. This girl was about twenty, he figured, and she was dark and thin, marked by her olive skin, her gypsy eyes. They showed anger now, but he knew they could show mirth just as readily, and they did that suddenly as she began to laugh.

"Bet I almost scared you to death, huh?"

Buck smiled and said, "Well, it ain't every day a pretty girl comes out the brush and runs you over. Now what were you doing in there?"

"Hiding."

Buck scowled. "And why?"

"I thought you were Jay."

"Now ain't that something," said Buck. "She thought I was Jay."

The smile died and hardness took hold of her thin lips. "Jay Rolling is my fiancé," she said. "He rides a horse like yours. I hid and intended to surprise him. But when I saw you weren't him, I pulled my horse back—and the damned fool stampeded. Who are you?"

He told her. "I own the Trander ranch."

"Oh."

He asked, "And who are you?"

"Nita Stebbins."

He remembered Martin James' description of Deacon Stebbins' daughter. He said, almost cynically, "I guess that means you and I are to be on opposite sides of the fence here, Miss Nita."

Her face was frozen. "I guess so."

He lifted his hat and said, "*Adios*," and then remembered he wasn't in Texas, so he added, "Good day," and rode on. When he glanced back, a hundred yards on, he saw she had turned her horse, and was riding at a lope toward Missouri City. He thought, *So she's going to marry Jay Rolling, whoever he is, and he'll have a firebrand to tame, I figure.* But Jay Rolling's troubles—or joys—were no concern of his, and he put the bronc into a long lope across the hills. The dust churned beneath the steel-shod hoofs and lifted lazily and settled. This range was sleepy and without hope, and it was waiting for winter. The air was chill with the high altitude and he pulled his buckskin jacket closer.

The wind came in, gruff and strong from the southwest, and there was a spit of rain in it. He brushed a drop from his cheek. This rain, they had told him back on the Yellowstone, was a forerunner of snow—it would come first and then change into snow. The cottonwoods bowed with massive heads and the wind whipped by and became lost, and the calmness held again.

There was a drift-fence running across the bottom-land between the river and the hills, and he knew that separated his Quarter Circle Lazy S from Deacon Stebbins' N Bar 5. According to what he had learned, Trander had built it before he had left the country, an old man who had had enough of cattle and wild winds and unending range.

He opened the gate without leaving kak, rode his horse through and also closed the gate without dismounting, looping the wire around the diamond-willow gatepost. This was his own range—bought and paid for lock, stock and barrel—and it was good range. Bluejoint and alfalfa hay had been cut and were in stacks, long yellow piles that would bring his horses through the winter. They were fenced, these stacks; that was so no stock could break in and tear them down. Off in the distance, he saw a mower and team, small against the green of an alfalfa field, and beyond this he saw a team and hayrake, working the outer fringes of the field being mowed.

He heard a horse behind him, coming on a lope, and he pulled in and saw that it was the girl he had talked to, down in Missouri City. He said, "You're a long ways from home, ma'am."

"I'm going home," she said. She pulled in beside him.

"Oh, I figured you lived in town."

She said, "I'm Laurie Mooney, Mr. Talbert. Pike Mooney is my father. I was talking to Dad, and to Hump Quigley, after I saw you in front of the Custer Bar. Seems to me somebody—all of us, in fact—got off on the wrong boot."

"They pressed me."

"Do Texas men brace that easily?"

He turned and looked at her and said clearly, "When they call them *rebs*, they do." He gestured across time and space. "Back there—south of Missouri City—is my horse herd—mares with a few colts born on the way and mares that will raise good colts next spring. Four thousand head of them, counting the stallions—the last of a big Texas horse outfit that raised stock for the saddles of the Mill Iron, the Matador, the Turkey Track and other Texas spreads that would make your biggest Montana iron look like a dairy farm. You know why I'm moving, don't you?"

His sincerity held her. "Carpet-baggers?"

He was quiet and harsh. "They came from the north, armed with documents, with the law—they took our lands and our homes and turned them over to others. Some cases, I guess, they took our women. Maybe I was lucky there because I didn't have any women, or a woman."

She said, "Oh."

"That fits it," he said. "Just plain 'Oh.' "

She laughed and the freckles were dots across her nose. "Did Nita Stebbins ride out of town with you, Mr. Talbert. I saw her going toward town as I rode out."

He told her about meeting Nita, about her mentioning Jay Rolling. "Who is he?" he asked.

"The N Bar 5 foreman. He runs the spread, figuratively and literally. Stebbins stays in town most of the time—he's crippled, you know—and just once in a while he rides out in a buckboard to the ranch, and therefore Rolling has absolute control. He's a vain man, a tall man—handsome in a way. He came in quite a few years ago, coming from Oregon with the Z Bar 6 stock, and then he came south and Deacon Stebbins hired him to rod the N Bar 5. He knows cattle and he knows men."

He said, "And, judging from Nita, he knows women, too."

Laurie glanced at him. "She has a violent temper. We went to grammar school together. I just came home from college last spring, and I haven't seen her much since then. But maybe this sounds like sour grapes."

"You concede her little," agreed Buck Talbert.

He had got off on the wrong foot, and her face told him that. They talked of irrelevant matters after

16748

that—she showed him the lay of his Quarter Circle Lazy S land and from a high ridge she pointed out the three ranchhouses.

"South there, across the hills—see it? Well, that's Stebbins' headquarters. His cattle run between there and Bitter Water Creek—oh, I guess he runs twenty thousand, around there. He feeds down on his Missouri River meadows during the winter, and you saw his haystacks back yonder."

Buck nodded.

Her arm swung from the south to the east. There, along the river, Buck saw the outlines of a sprawled out ranch, some ten miles or so away. "And that is our place, Mr. Talbert."

Buck studied it, said, "Nice location."

"We raise horses only. Some go to the cavalry, others to the cow outfits across the river and down the river—to the Bar C at Poplar, the Circle Diamond north of Malta, the Circle X in the Little Rockies, the Bear Paw S over in the Bear Paws. Some go into Canada around Wood Mountain and we sell saddle broncs to the Sweetgrass Hills outfits, to the cow-outfits on the Sun River around Great Falls and Choteau."

"Can you supply that demand?"

She thought, then said, "No, we can't."

"Then what's the kick about?" said Buck quietly.

"You can't supply them and I'm not pushing in on your sales. Yet your dad told me, down in Missouri City, that there wasn't room."

"We're moving out," she said. "Spreading. Dad tried to buy the Trander place—but, well, he and old Trander fought, and Trander put principle before money, and he wouldn't sell."

"And my ranchhouse?"

She pointed straight north. "There it is."

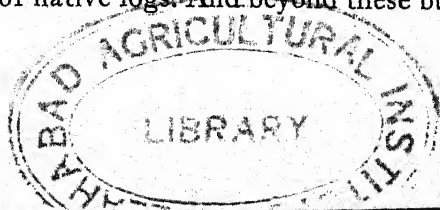
Buck asked, "Down there in the cottonwoods?"

"That's it."

He sat there, quiet in his saddle, his eyes somber with thought. There had been this long, winding trail; there had been the guns and the war behind that; there had been Texas and the sod buildings on the Brazos. And now this group of buildings, there along the river with its cottonwoods and diamond willows and chokecherry trees.

The place was built in form of a U. The bottom of the U faced them, and across this was the ranchhouse made of logs with a long porch on the north side. A single-story building, it hugged the earth compactly in the distance and space. Buck looked at it and found it good.

On each side of the house were the barns, the blacksmith shop, the cook shack and the bunkhouses, also all made of native logs. And beyond these build-



ings, and closer to the river, were the corrals. They were massive pole affairs, covering a lot of space, and they would hold big herds.

"It looks all right," he said.

She said, "It is all right," and became silent. After a while she added, "And this road here—the one to the north—leads into it. A few of Trander's men—Joe Morgan and John Haight—stayed to put up hay. I saw them working when I came out of town. Did you know that?"

"Yes, they told me about that when I bought the ranch."

"They're good men," she said, "with a plow or a hayfork or a mower, but they aren't saddle-men and they can't handle guns too well."

He looked at her steadily, "Will it come to that?"

"Horses are going. Where? Nobody knows. Deacon Stebbins has been losing a few head of cattle now and then. Of course, the Indians are getting some of the stock, that's only logical."

"Trander?"

She frowned and said, "I don't think so. I believe it is still going on." She was grave and considerate, testing each word. "Anyway, Dad says he has lost some horses, but Hump Quigley says Dad is wrong, and maybe Hump is right."

Buck asked, "Why do they call him Hump?"

"Humphreys," she said. "His full name."

Buck said, "Well, I'll be moseying on," and touched his horse. He left her there, loping down the slope, and he glanced back once to see she was pushing her horse hard, moving toward the Circle 8. *She's all right, he thought, and she wants to play the game square, but where in the hell would this Nita wildcat fit in?* . . . She was like a prairie fire sweeping through buffalo grass and just as unpredictable and unmanageable. But why was he thinking of Nita?

When he came into the ranch there was a small plume of smoke coming from the cook shack. Maybe there was a cook for Joe Morgan and John Haight, or maybe one or both of the men were married, and a woman cooked for them. Still, it was too early for supper.

He dismounted, leaving his horse with dragging reins, and he entered the cook shack. One man was sprawled over a chair reading an old magazine and the other was frying spuds on the low cookstove. The pungent odor of burning cottonwood came to him and he liked it, and the spuds smelled plenty good too.

"Almost chow?" he asked.

The thick man looked up from his magazine, regarding him with a solid glance, then looked back again. The man at the stove turned, holding his

spatula. He was a grizzled, whiskery man of indeterminate age.

"Almost that," he said. "Who are you, fella?"

"Buck Talbert."

"Newcomer here?"

Buck said, "Yes," and added: "Are you two former Trander riders?"

The stocky man looked up, pushed his magazine aside, and said surlily, "What is this, Talbert? A game? Trander's left the country and he won't be back. Sure, there are two Trander men here, but they're out cuttin' hay. Ain't you the new man that Jay Rolling sent over?"

Buck stood there, eyes sharp. So Jay Rolling was sending a new hand over, and they mistook him for that man, who would be a Deacon Stebbins N Bar 5 rider. And what in the hell was Jay Rolling—or any N Bar 5 rider—doing on his Quarter Circle Lazy S range?

"I own this place," said Buck.

The thick man returned to his magazine. "Try another," he said.

Buck had the first pullings of anger. The man at the stove said, "Just what is this, if you'll tell us?"

Buck said, "Get out, men. We don't need any N Bar 5 men here. Just what are you doing on my ranch?"

The short man got to his feet, a great unconcern in him. He walked forward, boots hitting hard. He said, "N Bar 5 men make their own way, pilgrim, and it's for you to make tracks, not us. Jay Rolling put us here to watch that no N Bar 5 stock crossed the river, and we're staying here." He halted close, his eyes small.

Buck did not hit. He drew his gun and chopped. The stocky man tried to duck, but the gun hit him and dropped him. He was on the floor then, sitting there with blood on his scalp, and he was dazed. Buck turned his gun on the man at the stove.

"You got any duds or personal belongings?"

"Just in those warbags there."

"Pack them and get your horses and go."

The man shrugged and said, "All right, Talbert," and stuffed dirty shirts into the warbags. By this time the stocky man had got to his feet. He stood there and wiped his forehead with a towel.

"You must mean business," he said, his fight gone.

Buck nodded.

They gathered their duds, went out to the barn. They saddled their horses and rode south without another word. Buck watched them leave with a great unrest pulling in him, and then he turned toward his new ranch.

An hour later, after exploring the buildings and

finding them to his liking, he had a meal on the stove when the two hay-hands came in. They came in the door together, gruff and morose, and then they stopped and looked at him, surprise showing on their dirty, hay-dusty faces.

"Now who t'hell are you?"

Buck said, "Your new boss, Buck Talbert," and watched them.

Joe Morgan's thin face showed a smile. A thin, sleepy man, he carried himself lazily, without much ado. Joe Haight was a bluff, ruddy fellow with a tough smile. He said, "We heard you were coming, Buck," and he introduced himself and Morgan. "What happened to these Stebbins hands?"

"Ran them out."

Morgan looked at the blood on the floor and said, "Had a ruckus, huh?"

"You could call it that."

Haight said, almost too slowly, "I think we'll all get along okay, Buck."

"How long those men been here?"

"All summer, more or less, since Trander left. Come riding through, would stop and eat our grub, then pull out. Jay Rolling himself was here a few nights." He lifted his shoulders and let them fall and the gesture was heavy with meaning. "Why, I dunno, Buck. But the ol' Missouri is a wide, silent

river. Or am I just talking?"

"Jus' talkin'," grunted Morgan.

Buck sighed and said, "Time will tell, men. Well, I'm glad you're staying on, 'cause I sure need the hands." He told them about his crew: aged Trigg Jones, black Tin Ear Jackson, and Mexican Pipo Alvarado. And the horse-jingler, kid Bill Tompkins, and old Weasel Gordon, the pot rassler.

Joe Morgan rustled some chuck, and while they were eating they heard a horse come up and stop outside. Buck pushed back his chair and went to the door. The man outside was tall, rawboned, with a harsh, high-cheekboned face. His eyes were sharp and smart under heavy brows and he sat an arrogant saddle.

He asked, "Who are you?"

Buck said, "I own this place. Buck Talbert's the name. And who are you, cowboy?"

"Jay Rolling." The N Bar 5 boss loafed in the saddle. "What became of those two hands I had stationed here, Talbert?"

"They went home. One had a split skull. My gun-barrel did it." Buck was watching the arrogant man closely but he saw little change in his manner. Only his eyes, for an instant, showed a hardness; then this was gone, and the smooth exterior was there, a barrier against the world.

Rolling said, "You swing a fast gun, then?"

Buck said, "We don't need N Bar 5 men on the Quarter Circle Lazy S, Rolling. I came in here peaceful, and they've crossed me once or twice already. You've had two men here this summer without call. Could you tell me why you had them here?"

"Cattle," said Rolling. "Keep them from drifting." He turned his horse and added, "They won't bother you again, Talbert," and rode off, heading at a hard lope to the south toward Deacon Stebbins' outfit.

Buck watched him go.

THREE

When Jay Rolling came into the N Bar 5 he had a great urgency pulling at him, but he held it beneath a tough exterior. He stepped down and stripped his horse and turned him into the pasture along the creek. He stood there for a long moment, watching the sweat-marked animal roll in the sand, and then he was aware that Nita Stebbins was coming from the house toward him.

"I waited along the trail for you, and when I rode out it wasn't you—it was Buck Talbert, the new owner of the Trander place. Have you met him yet?"

Rolling looked at her. He had been building up his thoughts, letting cause and effect run ahead, and she was breaking into his planning. This irrita-

ted him, it drew a fine harsh line across him, but he did not show it.

"We've met."

She said, "You didn't ride the trail, Jay."

He was abruptly impersonal. "I made the loop and came around and by the Trander place to see our men there, but Buck Talbert had already run them off." He weighed these things and guessed at their total. "Do I have to account to you for each move I make? We ain't married yet."

"Damn you!" She turned and walked off.

He thought, *You'll come around in time . . . or go to hell*, and then he let his ideas settle on Buck Talbert and his men and his horses, and he wondered just what the change would be in this Missouri River country. He was silent and filled with anger, and yet he had made himself wordless back there at the Quarter Circle Lazy S, for he had not wanted trouble. Not because he was afraid of it but because he did not think it proper . . . at that time.

There was a hint of coolness across the dusk wind, and he felt its touch upon him. He pulled his gun around, letting it ride well on his thigh, and went to the pump back of the frame house, where he pumped a drink of cold well water. Riders were coming in from riding line and bog and they lifted

their hands, lifeless in the heat and tired by the trail, and he answered their salutations with brief nods. One man came past, a stocky man of about forty, and Jay Rolling waved him in.

"Step down, Jess," he said.

Jess dismounted and let his horse drink at the trough. He settled on his haunches, his star-rowel spurs digging the dust behind him. "You've got something on your mind, Jay?"

"Texas man, Jess?"

Jess looked at him. His face, despite its blandness, showed a hard interest. "Used to be, Jay. But one day the Rangers jumped me hazin' some broncs along, and they misinterpreted my actions—I was just drivin' 'em to water, and they read the sign otherwise. I hate people that ignorant, so I fanned out."

"I didn't ask your history."

Jess clipped, "Then what do you want?"

Jay Rolling hunkered beside Jess. He drew his finger through the dust. "Today I talked with a newcomer here—he bought the old Trander place. His name is Buck Talbert, from Texas. . . ."

"His dad ran horses down there . . . the Brazos."

"Tough?"

"The old man is dead. Buck, this fella, went through the reb war. When he came back—" he

spread hard-knuckled hands "—nothing left. So I've heard, of course."

"Does Buck know you?"

"No. I knew his dad, though."

Rolling put one leg out straight and dug in his pocket for a match. He waited until Jess had finished rolling his cigarette, and then Jay Rolling put the match to life, pounding it against his chap wing. He lit Jess' smoke and then his own and he finally broke his silence.

"A tough man, then, with tough riders. . . . A new hand and a bunch of new players in this Missouri River poker game. Might prove interesting, at that. Have you seen Hump Quigley today?"

"Hump and Pike Mooney were in town today. I met them along the road. We just said howdy and drifted by. But Hump'll know about this fellow and I got a hunch he'll meet us."

"We'd better eat," said Rolling.

Jess went ahead, leading his horse, and Rolling went to the ranchhouse. Nita had changed to a housedress, and Rolling thought, *If a man wanted to be tied down I guess life would be all right with her*, but he didn't like the thought.

Her anger had passed and she kissed him.

Rolling returned the gesture lightly. He looked at the heavy Gros Ventre squaw who stood in the

door of the kitchen. "You shouldn't go around kissing men in front of other people."

Nita said, "Oh, pshaw, just Minnie, and she knows we are to be married anyway." She hooked her arm in his. "Won't we be a swell couple, Minnie?"

Minnie said, "You sure will," and waddled into the kitchen. She was shapeless, fat and ugly, yet her black eyes, deep behind rolls of fat, were shrewd and quick, and they had seen a lot of life. She had been Nita's companion since the girl's babyhood, and she had come in on this range with Nita and Deacon Stebbins.

Rolling was silent during most of the meal. Nita chattered on, her talk irrelevant, her talk gay. Minnie served and said nothing. But Rolling caught her gaze on him once, and when he glanced at her she looked away.

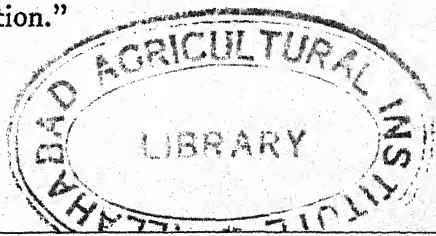
He pushed back his chair, said, "Jess and I have a little riding to do, Nita. He built a fence around the Willow Bogs today and he wants me to okay it."

"I'll go with you, Jay."

He stood up. "Long ride, honey, and you'll be tired."

"You don't want me to go?"

He shrugged. "You jump quick, Nita, and always in the wrong direction."



"All right," she said.

Jess was waiting at the barn. He glanced back and saw Nita and he said, "That girl may turn out to be dangerous, Jay. She watches you too close and she's for you, and when a wildcat makes up its mind to get something, it goes after it hell's fire or river water."

Jay Rolling said, "My business, fellow."

"I'm in this, too," Jess reminded him. He swung up and pulled around. "Where did you say we were going?"

"Willow Bog."

"Guess we ride that direction then—a ways, anyway."

The night was moving down and whipping across the range. Jess looked at the sky and said, "There'll be snow some one of these days, Jay, sure as I'm bowlegged, and that damned long Montana winter will be at hand." He was silent as he thought of snow and blizzard and freezing cold.

"He's got four thousand head of horses," said Jay Rolling.

Jess looked up speculatively. "He hasn't got feed for that many," he said.

"There's plenty of hay along the Musselshell River," said Rolling. "Sells cheap enough, too, because there's more tonnage than there are cattle or

horses. He could buy some there and feed."

"Quite a haul."

"About twenty-five—thirty miles, and not bad with bobsleds after the snow gets hard. If Trander'd sold to Deacon Stebbins, things would have been all right, but Trander hated Deacon, just like he hated Pike Mooney. When he sold out to this Texan he raised hell with all of us."

"Deacon will have a plan."

"His plan," corrected Jay Rolling. "Not mine."

They rode at a quick lope. Rolling was ahead on his stirrups, standing in his oxbows, his body aslant into the gathering night. Jess rode solid between horn and rim, his body corpulent and strong. When they went along the river, they drew in and settled at a long running-walk, and the sound of the water lapping against the bank of gumbo and clay was a fine, thin noise that grew and filled the night. And with it were the sounds of bullfrogs arching their throats in the cattails and willows that lined the muddy, dirty river.

"This is it," said Jess, and turned into the willows. They rode across a small stretch of water, their horses splashing the muddy spray, and they came out on a neck that ran into the river. This was about a hundred yards wide and a quarter mile long, and filled thickly with diamond-willows, chokecherry

trees, cottonwoods and now and then a vagrant box-elder tree.

Jess led. He stopped suddenly, drew in, and said, "I think I fell off the trail, Jay."

"This way."

Jay Rolling led thereafter. The willows, whipping back behind his passage, came against Jess, and he held his arms out to ward them off. After a while, they came to a clearing, and in this space of grass and short buckbrush was a cabin. A log cabin, set almost on the river's edge.

"No light," murmured Rolling.

"He'll come, later."

They left their horses in the brush, tying them to willows, and went ahead and rested beside the cabin, squatting there and smoking. The night was heavy with silence and darkness, and finally Jess broke it by asking, "What about this Nita woman? What if she followed us?"

"She ain't suspicious."

Jess shifted and said, "How do you know?" He did not wait for an answer. "Dammit, Jay, no man knows what goes on in a woman's mind; she doesn't know herself." He added, as if in defense of his theory, "I should know, I've been married three times. Yeah, I should know."

"You should."

Jess glanced at him and felt a strange loneliness. He did not know this man. He had ridden beside him for three years, and yet this man was a stranger. They were sitting there now, and they were close together, yet there was nothing tangible, no friendship, holding them. Jess knew that and wondered: usually if you ride with a man for a thousand days, you get to know him and he knows you, but he did not know this man, Jay Rolling. And did Rolling know him?

Jess thought, *He knows me too well . . . the smart hombre.*

Jay Rolling shifted, said, "Got a match, Jess?"

Jess cupped the flame and shoved it against Jay Rolling's face and cigarette. Rolling drew and pulled the smoke in. "*Gracias, amigo.*"

The minutes pulled out and became an hour. Bullfrogs croaked and somewhere a timber owl made its weird hoot. The air was warm there across the river lands. But back on the hills, it would be colder. Rolling pulled his brush-jumper tighter. "Hump Quigley was ridin' a lame horse the day they had the race to the gent who handed out the brains to us mortals. . . ."

Jess nodded.

"He braced Buck Talbert today."

"Yes?"

"A man out the ranch told me—he was in Missouri City today. Pike Mooney and Hump were in the Custer Bar. Talbert came in and they drank. Hump got too strong, and they had trouble. And Hump took second money."

Jess was thoughtful. "Well, that should put Talbert in wrong with Mooney, huh? How do you figure Deacon Stebbins will stand?"

"Only one way he can stand—against Talbert."

"I reckon that's it." Jess pushed his cigarette dead with his thumb. "Rider coming through the willows, Jay."

The man came closer, riding slowly. They saw him pull in, and he called, "Hello, the shack."

Rolling said, "Here."

Quigley came down from his saddle. He was tall and rawboned against the night's backdrop. "Be snowin' soon, Rolling. Cold up on the rimrock. That wind has cold needles in it." He settled down beside them and rubbed his hands. "Figured you'd be here, maybe. Well, what's the good word?"

Rolling spoke. "What happened in town?"

Quigley told him about his fight with Buck Talbert. "This might make us change some of our plans, Rolling? This Texican is a tough man."

"I don't think so," said Rolling. "We can work the same as we did when Trander ran the outfit."

Sure, the Texan is tough—but we've seen a few things ourselves."

"What's the next move?" asked Quigley.

"You and Jess and the other two fellows work the same as you've planned. Shove those N Bar 5 cattle across the river at Duck's Point and trail them into the Little Rockies. That army buyer'll be at the Lone Pine Springs for them. I got word the other day he would be there."

"But Deacon Stebbins," said Hump Quigley, "might have some plan about stealing this Talbert gent's horses, just like we stole Trander's broncs."

"I'll see him tonight," said Jay Rolling. He got to his feet. "Jess, you ride with Hump. Camp in the Dead Ridge line camp. Work with him during the daytime. How many days till you get a herd built, Hump?"

"Three. Maybe four."

Rolling thought and said, "I'll be with you when it comes time to shove them across the river," and went for his horse. This was shaping up and doing all right, and he led the way through the brush with Quigley following him and Jess behind the Circle 8 foreman. They came to the trail and Quigley said, "Good luck, Jay," and then he and Jess were moving out of sight in the darkness. Rolling drew in and sat there and listened to their hoofs, and then these

sounds ran out and he rode toward town and Deacon Stebbins.

Missouri City was steadily going dark when he rode in. He had ridden the high road, although it was longer, for he had no haste pushing him. From the ridges and hills he could watch the lights go out in the town as men went to bed. They would be bright against the night and then suddenly they would be gone without warning. One by one they were being extinguished.

The wind had been rough, driving the cold into him. He left his horse in front of the bank, glancing up at the light in the upstairs. Cuffing his hands together, he climbed the back stairs, and knocked.

"Come in, Jay."

Rolling entered. The lamp was bright and he blinked his eyes. Deacon Stebbins held his violin in his scrawny hands, the blue veins tight across the wizened paws. He had music on the steel stand.

He said, "Well, Jay?"

"That light's bright," said Jay Rolling, "and the night is damned chilly, Deacon." He stepped past the man dressed in the black suit and held his hands over the pot-bellied heater.

"There's no fire there," said Deacon Stebbins.

Rolling stepped back. He was angry. "How in the hell do you keep warm?"

Deacon Stebbins' eyes were black agates. "Maybe I haven't got any blood in me to cool."

Rolling looked at him. This man was small and deformed. But he was hard and tough, and those claws could hold a gun. Rolling had seen them hold a gun and he had seen that gun speak.

"Maybe not," he said. Then he added, "What about this Talbert fellow, Deacon? What's in the deck the way you cut it?"

Deacon Stebbins raised his violin. He laid the instrument against his wizened, wrinkled neck; he drew his chin down and twisted his head. He hit the strings three times—dark, savage strokes that brought dark, savage music. Then he lowered the bow, his eyes tough.

"We steal his horses, Jay, just like we stole those of Trander. Yes, we steal his, just like we are stealing those of Pike Mooney." The bow fell and brilliant music filled the lonely, lamplit room. Wild music it was, and it stirred Jay Rolling, mixed hate with fear and desire with greed. Suddenly, the bow fell.

"Where is Nita?"

"Out to the ranch."

"She didn't come in with you?"

"No."

"She doesn't know," said Deacon Stebbins. He

hobbled to the window, a broken, twisted man. He gripped the heavy drapes and held himself. "She'd better not know, either, Rolling."

"She'll not know."

"She loves you," said Deacon Stebbins. He hobbled back to his music and raised his violin. He looked across its dark sheen at Jay Rolling. "You'll marry her, Rolling, as you've told her."

Rolling said, "Why talk of that?"

"Just a thought." Deacon Stebbins drew the bow slowly and the music trilled. "Yes, we go on the same—only we steal Talbert's horses instead of Trander's."

"But Talbert is tough."

"A bullet," said Deacon Stebbins, "will kill any man."

Jay Rolling considered that. He said finally, "All right, Deacon," and turned and left. The violin was singing now: it was alive and healthy and the air was full. Rolling went down the back stairs, listening to the keening of the wind and the thickness of the violin. He went into the Custer Bar. Casey was alone.

"Quiet night, Casey?"

"Week night, Jay. Drink?"

"One. Rye."

Casey said, "Me, too," and poured two. He raised

it and said, "My nightcap, Jay," and they both drank. Rolling paid and went out; he stood there and listened to the violin. Then he went down the street, crossed the alley, and knocked on the door of a white house.

A woman's voice asked, "Jay?"

"Yes."

She was a small woman. She wore a robe and she had it pulled tight across her thin body. Her voice was husky, throaty. She said, "Won't you come in, Jay?"

"Haven't time, Mona." He held her and kissed her. "Have some riding to do, but I'll see you in a few days."

She said slowly, "All right. But if this Nita girl—"

"Don't worry about her."

He went to his horse, there in front of the bank. Although the building was dark, the violin was singing upstairs. He mounted and rode out and the violin's song was behind him and around him until it fell back into the distance.

He thought of Deacon Stebbins, up there in the darkness.

FOUR

Joe Morgan and John Haight and Buck Talbert finished supper and Buck shoved back his chair with, "That was all right, men." The kitchen was warm and friendly and the wind was strong outside.

Morgan said sleepily, "We'll ride with you."

Buck nodded agreement. They got up and went out. There were fresh horses in the barn and they saddled them and hit the trail. The night was thick with blackness, but when they gained the hills the shadows fell back and it was lighter.

"You can cut across country," said Morgan. "You don't have to go around by Missouri City. That's out of your way, Buck."

"Point," said Buck.

Morgan took the lead then, with Buck and John Haight following him. Sometimes they had to string

out in single file. They were riding hill horses, and these horses knew their rough trails, and their hoofs were sure against the rocks. They were in the rougher country, and once Buck glanced back, but he could not see the Missouri River basin. Somewhere behind, it lay somnolent and sleeping, dreaming ancient dreams.

Morgan pulled in and said, "We better skip to the west a little. Patty Muscaton was telling me today he saw a Crow camp over this direction, and they aren't so friendly sometime, especially with the trouble down on the Laurel reservation. I wish they'd pen those Injuns in or turn the country over to them for keeps."

"Snow in the air," said John Haight.

Morgan moved to the west, and they swung over a mesa. Below them on the flat they saw lights—campfires and lighted tepees. "Patty was right," said Morgan.

"They're moving south to the Yellowstone," said John Haight. "They've got almost all the buffalo killed off in Montana and they ain't got nothing to live on unless they get hold of a sow now and then. They're heading back for the agency and some cow meat to pull them through the winter."

Buck asked, "Any trouble this last summer?"

"They tangled with the Blackfeet up on the upper

Milk around Sweetgrass, I reckon. This band might be part of the main tribe that fought up there, and it might not. Never can tell a thing about an Injun any more than that he likes to fight. But I guess he ain't alone in that; us whites ain't doin' so bad ourselves when you think of the Wilderness Campaign. Grant lost sixty thousand men in that one, I've read somewhere."

"Riders ahead," grunted Joe Morgan.

They went into the brush and two riders came by, driving hard against the slanting wind. They went by fast, gaunt shapes on fast horses, and then their hoofs had died in the wilderness.

Buck asked, "Know either one?"

"That one," said Haight. "He looked like Hump Quigley."

"I thought that," agreed Buck. "But who was the other?"

Morgan shrugged, glanced at Haight. "One was Quigley," said Haight, "but I don't know who the other was. Probably a Circle 8 man and they were probably heading back for the home ranch."

When they reached the high ranges, the snow was falling. It was drifting in the wind, driving hard across the sagebrush and greasewood, clinging to the clumps of foxtail and buffalo grass. They had taken overcoats—Buck had found one in the house

—and they untied these from behind cantles and put them on. They had mittens, too; rawhide mittens with woolen linings. They were stiff and cumbersome but they were warm.

Buck asked, "Will this turn into real winter?"

"Might, and might not," said Morgan.

Buck smiled. "Republican answer."

Haight said, "Ten years ago—or thereabouts—we had early snow like this, and it hung on until April, by hell. Cold as all billy hell through January and February, and it dragged into March, too." He was silent for a long moment. "Then next year there were flowers—yes, I mean flowers—bloomin' on the hills in March. Bluebells and lupine and wild sweetpeas. You can never tell about Montana weather, Buck."

"That's it," agreed Morgan.

After three hours riding, they came to where the herd should have been, according to Buck's calculations. The snow had stopped and the wind had fallen back. The moon was yellow over the pines and ridges, and it slanted across the white, new snow. They cut across the Missouri River trail and saw no marks of horse spoon on it. That mean that the herd had not yet reached this point.

"Maybe Tin Ear bedded the broncs down," muttered Joe Morgan.

They rode south and Morgan's prophecy proved correct. The Quarter Circle Lazy S riders had bunched the herd, letting it graze along a high ridge, while they waited for morning. Buck raised his right hand and hollered, "We're coming in, Tin Ear. Buck Talbert and two other riders."

Tin Ear called, from the sandstones, "This way, Lieutenant, and for God's sake, what held you up?"

Buck and the two riders turned that way, and Tin Ear loped up. He was wrapped to his ears in an old muffler, but he was bare-handed and without an overcoat. He rode close to Buck and put his enormous arm around him and hugged him. A crooked, happy smile broke across his battered, ugly face. He had fought bare-knuckled for sixty-eight rounds on the sands of New Orleans and it had taken the heavyweight champ of the world to beat him into unconsciousness and give him the physical features that had given him his name—two misshapen cauliflower ears.

"Howdy, Lieutenant. And who am these yere boys?"

Buck introduced Morgan and Haight. "He can't forget the war," he said. "He was my orderly, and since then I've been 'Lieutenant' all the time."

"Heard of you, Jackson," said Joe Morgan.

Tin Ear Jackson grinned and swung his arms. "Anythin' bad, Morgan? By heaven, this am sure a col' country, fellas. Now down in Memphis, or Houston—"

"It's warm," finished Buck.

Tin Ear shook his woolly head. "That lieutenant don't even let me finish my words. I dunno jus' what this colored boy would do without him. . . ." He got his huge Justins loose from his Visalia stirrups and kicked lustily. "By heaven, Lieutenant, mah feet am all done froze to my boots, you know."

"You'll get warm some day."

Tin Ear grinned. "Yes, suh, when Ah goes to hell, suh."

"Shake out the broncs," ordered Buck, "and we'll start drifting."

Trigg Jones and Pipo Alvarado came loping up. Trigg Jones, an ancient of eighty, pulled in, raw-hide and wire in his saddle. "Dang you for an alien, Buck, where in hades have you been? And who are these gents?"

Pipo Alvarado was a short, very slender Mexican. A jagged scar showed on his right cheek. According to what Buck had heard, an irate *senor* in *Baja California* had once worked Pipo over with a long banana knife. His harmonica hung from its chain around his neck.

16748

Buck answered their questions. "Where's the kid and Weasel?"

Pipo answered. "The keed, he ees got the horses behind those rocks, over there. Out of the weend. But ol' Weasel, he ees col' as all hell, and he ees een bed een hees bed wagon."

"I'll get him out," said Buck. He spoke to Joe Morgan. "We better push on before we run into heavier snow. Come daylight we oughta be down on the river bottom and home. Can we shove the herd through the hills the way we came or would it be best to drift around by Missouri City?"

Morgan thought briefly. "Better take the Missouri City route. It's longer, but that badland trail is tough, more so with a band of broomtails."

"Ride point," said Buck.

The mares stood bunched against the snow-laden wind. The riders got them started by popping them across the rumps with swinging lariats. Most of them had early spring colts. While some of the colts had had to be left on ranches on the long trek north because they had played out on the drive, most of them had come through with hoofs of rock and sleek muscles. Now there was some neighing and running until the colts found their mares.

Buck rode to the mess-wagon and snapped his quirt against the canvas, making a loud pop. He

waited, got no answer from inside, then snapped the quirt again. This time he heard a rustling of bedding moving.

"Who's out there?"

"Rattle your hocks, Weasel; we're driftin'."

Weasel Gordon popped out his head. He had a long, mournful face decorated by an over-sized nose which balanced over two long, fierce mustachios. He was of indeterminate age—anywhere between fifty and eighty.

"I gotta dress, Buck. Gotta get outa my nightgown."

"Oh, Lord," muttered Buck. Just then Bill Tompkins rode up, his boyish face blue with cold. "This ol' cabbage is in bed with a nightgown, Bill."

Bill Tompkins smiled. He was about sixteen, and his mother and dad had worked for Buck's father, down on the Brazos. When Bill had been a toddler, his parents had died of smallpox. The Talbert ranch had been his home from then on. Buck and he had gone fishing together.

"How in hell could he change in this cold weather?" marvelled Bill Tompkins. "Say, we movin', Buck? And what kind of a spread have we bought?" He did not wait for answers. "Boy, I like it up here in Montana. Like it snow and all. Man, this is a real country. Say, when did we see a fence last?"

Buck smiled at the horse-jingler's enthusiasm. "Way back on the Yellowstone, Bill. But you'll see some more soon, because the pastures on the Missouri—the hayfields and horse pastures—are fenced in. Better circle your horses and hit the trail behind the herd. Just follow it in."

Bill Tompkins rode off, whistling through cold lips. Buck waited, and finally Weasel Gordon climbed out of the bed wagon. "A man sure don't need no beddin' on this job," the *cocinero* grumbled. "What he needs here is a lantern to find his way around in the snow and sagebrush."

He and Buck harnessed the wagon broncs. They were skittish and shy and rolled to the side when the harness was slapped on them. They hooked the cold steel tug-rings to the double-trees and Weasel climbed up on the high seat, his long nose rimmed with frost.

"Jus' foller the herd, huh?"

Buck smiled. "Sure. And wipe your nose, old man."

Weasel pulled his forearm across his long beak. "Now get t'hell outa here an' get ridin'!" His team hit the collars and the wagon creaked away. "Hi-yuh, Daisy, bust them traces. Madge, belly down, girl. We're bound for the Ar'tic Circle, an' we change to dog team in Havrel!"

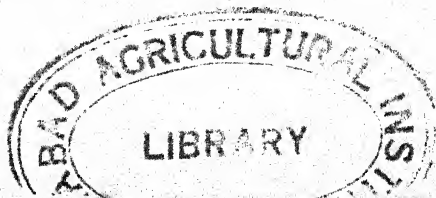
Havre was a town up north about sixty miles on the Milk River. Buck pulled his horse around. Sitting there on a windswept, snow-dotted ridge, he looked at the herd below, pushing at a long trot toward Missouri City. The faint faraway yips of the riders came floating back to him.

Weasel Gordon had pulled the mess-wagon back on the road and was loping his team to catch up with the herd. Buck heard the clatter of his pots and pans as he roared for more speed from his startled team. He reined his horse around and rode down-slope to where Bill Tompkins was trying to bunch his saddle-stock and get them rolling. There were no mares in this bunch. They were all geldings, broken well and wise to the way of saddle and trail.

"They're cold," said the kid. "They ain't used to this snow. They don't want to drift, but they want to bunch up under this cut-coulee and hump up and wait for the cold spell to pass. Wonder if this will last long, Buck?"

"Pretty early in the fall to hang on," growled Buck.

Buck rode into the bunched horses, his lariat beating them over the rumps. He hoped this cold spell didn't hang on for a number of reasons. There was still quite a bit of hay to put up in stacks on the home ranch. With snow on the ground, that hay



could never be cut and raked and stacked.

And he needed hay—lots of hay. And, what was more, he needed it desperately. A few miles back, he had talked with a drifting puncher the day before, and that man had told him about the abundance of good hay, southwest along the Musselshell River that entered the Missouri directly west of Missouri City. There was plenty of hay there—bluejoint hay—and this native grass was the best fodder a bronc could get, beating alfalfa and timothy for horse feed.

But a man needed money to buy hay.

The *remuda* was running now. Horses were bucking and galloping, heading into the scattered snow-storm. Buck sent home his hooks and rode east, heading them off, and Bill Tompkins pounded them in the rear, trying to straighten them out and swing them on the trail.

They pushed them sharply, whipping them back toward the trail. The snow cut off all sight of the mess-wagon and the main herd. The wind was bunching the snow against scraggly greasewood and sagebrush. Already it had whipped away the tracks of the mares and the mess-wagon.

Suddenly they came upon the mess-wagon. The *remuda* fell to a trot behind the canvas-covered wagon. Buck rode close to Weasel Gordon, who hol-

lered, "This storm looks like it aims to let up, Buck. Daylight's here, too."

Weasel was right. The sky was breaking in the west. An hour later, although the wind was still cold, the snow had stopped. Early forenoon found them hazing the horses through the main street of Missouri City. Early risers watched the herd from windows and sidewalks.

The mares drifted through town, shying at dogs and hollering youngsters. For over an hour they came through, and the snow behind them was melting when the last mare and colt loped out of town.

Deacon Stebbins had spent a ragged night. Dawn had found him up, his violin under his chin, playing a sweet, ancient lullaby. He played softly, his eyes closed; he kept the music low, his gnarled hands clutching the bow, stiff fingers on the strings.

He thought, *Horses coming*, and lowered the instrument. He hobbled to the window, a thin, emaciated man, ravaged by rheumatism and arthritis. The first of Buck Talbert's mares, her long-legged colt trotting and shying beside her, was entering the main street, with Joe Morgan riding point.

Talbert's herd, he told himself.

He stood there and watched, hidden by the heavy drape. He saw the stallions, too, and he marked them for good stock. *Better blood than in Pike*

Mooney's horses, he thought, and the cavalry re-mount stations will sure go for his colts when they get to be two- and three-year olds.

He watched the entire herd pass, his eyes without meaning or color. Then, when the end of the herd had sprinkled by, he went to the corner, hobbling and still carrying his violin.

He stopped and pulled up a section of floor. He laid it back like a lid and there was another section below this. Ropes ran to pulleys in the ceiling, and he laid his violin on the table. He stood on the section and let it fall slowly, letting out rope as he went down.

This way, using this as an elevator, he descended into his bank. He could regulate his speed of descent by the amount of rope he let out. He came down slowly and let the bottom of the elevator sit gently on the floor. None of his bank personnel had arrived yet, and he hobbled to a metal file case, walking slowly and with great difficulty. He went through the four drawers in the files but evidently did not find what he wanted. He went to his desk and looked in the big bottom drawer.

He found what he was looking for. A manila envelope, and scrawled on the outside in his erratic hand was "Buck Talbert." He opened it and looked at the statements within.

The information had come from two banks: one on the Brazos River in Texas and the other from Pueblo, Colorado. And both of them were financial statements of one Buck Talbert.

Deacon Stebbins studied them, crouched in his big chair. He went over them carefully and was still looking at them twenty minutes later when his head man came in, unlocking the door for the day's business.

He said, "You're up early this morning, Mr. Stebbins."

"Good morning, John."

The man was building a fire in the stove. His breath was white on the air. He wondered how long the crippled man had sat in the cold. Finally he had the draft roaring and a touch of heat was permeating the bank.

"Did you see the horse herd, Mr. Stebbins?"

Deacon Stebbins glanced up. "Yes, I did."

The man rubbed his long, thin hands. "Fine-looking horses," he said. "The finest-looking mares in this country, I heard a cowpuncher say."

Stebbins did not answer for some time. He was looking at the financial statements. Finally he said, "Yes, John, fine horses. . . ."

FIVE

By noon of the next day the snow had melted. The wind was coming from the west and it was drying the ground. A day or so of this wind and it would be dry enough to cut hay again.

Pike Mooney came into his Circle 8 two days later, tired from the saddle. He asked Laurie, "Where is Quigley?"

"Out on the range. Around Dead Ridge, I understand, looking at the mares there and seeing how the winter grass stacks up back in the high country."

Mooney scowled. "Don't have many horses around that spot." He rode into the barn and pulled off his bronc's rigging. Laurie followed him. "Did you buy any hay, Dad?"

"Yeah, some bluejoint. Bought it from Abe Al-

lons over on the Musselshell. We'll haul it over this winter. Sold it cheap enough, too—eight dollars a ton."

"That's good news."

He looked at her gruffly. "How is this Texas scissorbill getting along on the Trander ranch?"

"All right, I guess. He trailed his horses in yesterday and run them loose in the hills. Good mares and good colts. Looks like we have some competition, Dad."

"There's room . . . I guess." The big horseman's heavy face was deep with thoughts. "I reckon me and Quigley got kinda too big for our britches down there in Missouri City when we tangled with Buck Talbert." He rubbed his jaw slowly. "I still got an ache there."

"I wish that Trander had sold us that place."

"So do I, but he didn't." They went to the house. Pike Mooney had his arm around his daughter. His wife—a short plump woman—came down the walk to meet him. He hugged her. "Two of the damned best females in the world," he said. "That is, when they want to be."

He had made his stake a few years before at Alder Gulch and the diggings. He had seen men hanged there in the Vigilante days, and he had adjusted a few nooses himself around the throats of

the Plummer gang. Five years before he had bought the Circle 8 and turned to raising horses for the market. He was a tough man in a tight, for he could handle a gun and handle his fists. He was a deadly, unrelenting foe but a staunch, faithful friend.

He ate dinner and took a nap. The sun was bright when he came out, and he and Laurie saddled horses and hit over the hills. He rode a blue roan and she had her saddle on a short-barrelled little gray. The storm had driven some of his mares up into the high country, and now they were coming down on old feed. They were good horses with tough bottoms and hill legs.

They swung wide, looking over the stock and the grass, and came out on the ridge south of the Quarter Circle Lazy S. They held their horses there for a while, looking at Buck Talbert's spread.

Laurie said, "Let's ride down."

Pike Mooney rubbed his jaw. His gray-flecked eyes twinkled. "If you promise to keep him from hitting me, girl."

Laurie laughed. "Your big mouth got you into that!"

She rode in the lead down the hill, her father's roan following. When they rode into the ranch, Buck Talbert was working on a mower beside the

tool shed. He straightened and stared, a ball-pion hammer in one hand and a punch in the other. Tin Ear Jackson hunkered on his thick hams and regarded them through sleepy eyes.

"Howdy," said Buck.

Laurie said, "Close your mouth, Talbert, or you'll drop your false teeth. Nobody's going to hang your hide to the fence. You've met my dad, I understand."

"Yeah," said Buck.

Pike Mooney grinned. He rubbed his jaw again. "We've met," he admitted. "Kind of sudden, but I was carrying a jolt that day, Talbert, and maybe some of the hundred proof did some of my talking."

"Well," said Buck, plainly relieved. "It's nice to have neighbors. Will you light and rest your saddle blankets?"

"Got to push on," said Pike Mooney. He looked the ranch over carefully. "This sure is a nice throw-out, Talbert. Sure wish I could have talked Trander into selling it to me. When you get ready to drift, let me know and I'll take it off your hands."

"I won't drift. . . ."

"Just a thought," said Mooney slowly. He turned his horse. "You'll have to come over and see us folks some day. The missus was asking about you this noon."

Buck looked at Laurie. "We'll do that," he assured Pike. "Wait a minute; you haven't met Tin Ear, here." He introduced the giant Negro, who shook hands, grinning widely.

"You wanta watch the lieutenant," he told Laurie.

"Lieutenant?"

"Mistuh Talbert yere. Ah calls him that."

Laurie said, "Oh," and looked away.

They turned back toward the Circle 8, riding the hills. They had weaned the spring colts a month before. A piebald mare and another mare—a sorrel—were grazing along a side hill. They snorted, ears up, and turned and ran.

Pike Mooney scowled. "Wonder where those mares' colts are? They should be around close, even if they are weaned." He took his reins in and looked over the surrounding terrain. "A few head of mares over there, but there are no extra colts in the bunch."

"They're around," his daughter assured him.

Mooney turned in leather and regarded her thoughtfully. "You know, Laurie, I've never told your mother this—I didn't want to disturb her—but it seems to me like we have lost a few head of stock the last two—three years. Always after weaning, I find some mares that haven't a sign of a colt around. Most colts stay pretty close to their dams

the first winter and until their mother has a spring colt. Then they wander off and start rustling for themselves."

"You mean—you think somebody's stealing some of our colts?"

Pike Mooney shoved back his Stetson and scratched his scraggly hair. "Maybe I'm wrong, but our spring tally backs me up on this, girl." He was silent for a long moment. "But who's stealing them—if anybody is—and where are they taking them?"

"The cavalry posts won't buy them—they buy only long two- and three-year-olds. But they could be run across the river and taken north into Canada." She touched her gray with rowels. "Maybe they've just strayed off, Dad, and our tally might be a little wrong. When you run horses from here to hell and gone—wups, I forgot—from here to breakfast—"

Pike Mooney shook his head.

Laurie asked, "What about Buck Talbert and you?"

"You know, Laurie, I kinda like that fellow, and I think we'll get along all right, even if we did get off on the wrong boot. . . ."

From a ridge, they saw the Crow camp below them, on Porcupine Creek. The camp was breaking up. Dogs were barking and squaws shrilling. They

were loading *travois* and the bucks had the cavyv bunched.

"Going south to the reservation," grunted Pike Mooney. "Well, I'm glad of that, girl. Me, I don't like them redskins hangin' around."

"Maybe they've stole a colt or two?"

"Could be true." Her father grinned lopsidedly. "But I'm not goin' ride down there to find out. Reckon we better get outa this section before a scout sights us, if one hasn't already."

They met a Stebbins rider on Rocky Ridge. He said, "Howdy, folks," and kept on heading south.

"He's off range a little," said Laurie. "Do you know him, Dad?"

"His name is Jess, I believe."

They found Hump Quigley riding into the Dead Pine line camp. The line camp was a pine shack built along the draw. Quigley said, "Howdy, Pike. Howdy, Laurie. And what brings you two so far from the ranch on a raw fall day?"

"What the hell you holin' up here for?" asked Mooney.

"Got two boys working the ridges south of here, boss. Figured maybe some Circle 8 mares and colts might have wandered over in the bog country. My guess turned out right, too, 'cause we've headed quite a number of our horses north again. Snow catch

them down here and they might starve to death come the cold weather."

"You're close to the edge of Deacon Stebbins' range," said Mooney thoughtfully. "Deacon might not like it too much."

"T'hell with Deacon," said Quigley. "T'hell with this reb gent, too."

"Don't ride this Talbert fellow too much, Hump." Mooney told about the talk he had had with Buck Talbert. Hump Quigley's eyes were sharp with curiosity. "How come the change of opinion, Pike? I thought you aimed to try to run this Texas son back into the Lone Star State."

Pike Mooney chewed on his tobacco. "There ain't no reason to pick a fight with him, when a man gets right down to it. He's got ever'thing signed up legal and the only place we could push him is him running on gover'ment range that we been running on." He sighed. "And to tell the truth, this Deacon Stebbins is the gent we want, not Buck Talbert. He's run too many of his cattle on my horse graze."

Hump Quigley shrugged, said, "I see." He added, "We'll have this section worked in a few days, and then we'll mosey back to the home ranch."

"Okay. So long."

They rode north, and Quigley stood there, watching. He thought, *So the old man is softening and he*



wants to play up to this reb. Well, we'll see about that, won't we, Jay Rolling. . . . He watched until distance claimed them. Then he turned into the line camp, whistling soundlessly between his teeth as he opened a few cans of beans and lit a fire in the little cookstove.

Two hours later, when it was dusk, two riders came into view, sliding their horses through the shale as they descended the hill. They put their horses in the lean-to, fed them, and came inside, spur rowels jangling.

One said, "Thought I saw the Old Man and his girl from a distance today. They over this way, Hump?"

"Just happened to see them coming," said Quigley. He flipped a pan of biscuits out of the oven. "So I lit down here and met them. Damn lucky they didn't see me, too, 'cause I was just cutting out some of Deacon Stebbin's steers, when I got a glimpse of them."

"Reckon they saw you?"

"I was workin' them in the buckbrush on top a flat. They were below me." He shook his head. "No, they never saw me. How did you boys come out?"

"Shoved quite a few head into the canyon. Wonder if Jay Rolling will come out tonight?"

Quigley frowned. "Maybe," he said.

Jess came in at dark. "Saw Pike Mooney and Laurie today, Hump. Over on the Ridge. They were heading this way when I saw them."

Quigley told him what he knew.

Jay Rolling rode in when it was about nine o'clock. He called, "Hello the house and Quigley," and stepped down. He rode a black horse—a high-headed stud. Quigley came to the door and said, "It's all right, Jay."

Rolling was big. He filled the cabin. He looked at the men loafing on their bunks. "Hard-working bunch, huh!"

Quigley smelled whiskey on Rolling's breath. "Got an extra snort, Jay?"

Rolling had a quart. He passed it around. The men sat up suddenly and took notice. Rolling settled beside the door, sitting on his spur shanks. The tie-down strings on his holster were loose and they dangled against the dirty floor. "How many head you got gathered?"

"Almost enough," said Quigley. "We move tomorrow night. Everything ready across the river in Lone Pine Springs? And will that army man be there?"

"They transferred that army man," said Rolling. He held up his hand for silence. "But I got a better deal, men. We got a private party to buy them

and he'll sell them to the army. That makes it easier for us."

Quigley was studiously silent. "We been at this game for some years, Jay," he said slowly. "I got a nice jackpot in that San Francisco bank in my name. Some one of these days I'm lightin' out of this snowy country and you'll see me down on the beach in Rio."

"Stick this year," said Rolling. Outwardly the statement held no menace, but Hump Quigley read beneath it and recognized it as an order. He looked at Rolling's gun and finally said, "All right, Jay."

Rolling got to his feet. "See you tomorrow night." He went outside and stepped up and rode out fast. The sound of his leaving died and the men went to bed. By daybreak they were up again. Grumbling as they ate and grumbling as they went out into the dark, wind-driven dawn.

They posted Jess as lookout on a pine-studded ridge and went to work. They drifted only prime stock down into the canyon—the best of Deacon Stebbins' three- four-year old steers. Good beef that should have been trailed south to the Miles City army market. Brush cattle bred up with Whitefaces and combining the best features of each. But wild, though.

About noon they pointed the herd north. They

had the prime beef from Deacon Stebbins' herds. Shaggy, lumbering four-year-olds, beef to the hocks. With broad, thick backs and heavy necks. Jess and Hump Quigley rode the ridges, scouting the trail ahead. They turned their horses and rode in, stopping the herd.

Quigley said, "Injuns ahead. Crow band. Heading south toward Billings, I guess. We just hold the herd a while and they'll drift by." He was thoughtful. "Too many redskins runnin' around this section for comfort."

Jess said, "I'll ride back up and watch."

They held the herd for almost two hours, grumbling at the delay. The tired steers fell to grazing and some bedded down. The sun was warmer now, and the ridges cut them from the raw wind.

Jess rode down. "Everything all right. They're out of sight." He and Quigley took to the high route again and the other two started the herd once more. Some of the steers were lazy but they rode them to their hoofs and beat them with doubled *riatas*. They went at a long, lazy trot and, despite their haste, it was dark when they reached the silt-laden Missouri River.

The trail ran down the slope to the river, which lapped at its banks in the darkness. The rank smell of dirty, muddy water mingled with the sweet smell

of growing willows, of cattails, of wild ferns. Bawling, the sters trotted down, spread out along the gravel bar, and drank. A rider came out of the willows and Hump Quigley had his gun out, the prong eared back.

"Who t'hell—?"

"Me, Rolling."

Quigley's throat lost its tightness. "Some day you'll sneak up on a man like that," he said angrily, "and he'll shoot you to latigo straps. Where you been, anyway?"

Rolling's chuckle was hard. "Sitting my horse back here and watching you gents haze them steers down, Quigley. For all you have ears and eyes for, I could have been a state brand inspector, letting you walk into a trap."

"We knew we was safe," said Quigley hurriedly. "Seein' we got this close to the river, and was ready to shove them across."

Rolling chuckled again and Quigley did not like it. "Run them in," said the N Bar 5 boss, and his lariat rose and fell on the drinking steers. They were beating the bovines now, driving them into the wide, slow-flowing river. Water splashed and a few bawled and then the leaders took to the water.

The Missouri was wide there and there was only about a quarter-mile of swimming. The stream was

not strong enough to drive a cow or horse down-current. The cattle strung out, wading at first and then, when the gravel bottom got beyond their feet, they swam across, moving slowly but surely.

They rode good water horses. And those horses had swum this stream before, hazing other cattle across. Jay Rolling rode point, his black swimming easily with water just above the saddle skirts. Quigley took bottom flank and Jess top flank, and they held the cattle in line, keeping them from bunching in the water. The other two riders tailed the lag-gards.

Water lapped against man, horse and steer. The dark night lay against the dark water. Finally hoofs ground against gravel and the leaders started wading, the water receding on them. Ten minutes later, the herd was on the north side of the Missouri River, clambering out on the bank like wet water-animals. Rolling rode back and spoke to Quigley. "Let's push them easier now. We're safe and we got all night."

Quigley had lost his tightness. He loafed in the saddle now, chewing tobacco. "Yeah, Jay; okay." He looked at the rough badlands on each side, seeing their dim, dark outlines indistinctly. "This is where those Trander broncs are, ain't it?"

"Yeah, there are some over here."

"How'd they get over here, Jay?"

"Me and a few of the boys gathered some colts of Trander's a few years ago. One dark night, I sold them to a Canadian buyer, sight unseen. His men shoved them across the river and then, by damned, they lost them all here in the badlands. Even wanted his money back, the ornery son."

"Did he get it?"

Rolling smiled. "He didn't."

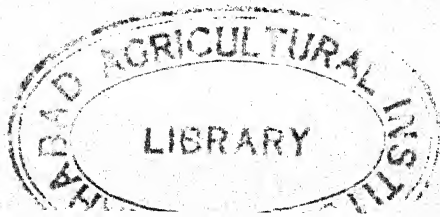
SIX

After three days of blustery fall weather, there came a lull in the wind finally. The next morning dawned bright and clear. It looked like a spring day. The sun was bright and by noon it was real warm.

"Indian summer," said Trigg Jones. The ancient had been in this northern country before, and had wintered once on the Wind River country in Wyoming. "Might stay this way for a month, clear and warm, and then we might have snow tomorrow."

"It should be dry enough to cut hay," said Buck.

They took the mowers and teams out that afternoon. Joe Morgan and John Haight hooked up the teams and started going. The bluejoint was still



damp, though, and the mower-guards would plug up with gumbo and grass. They would have to stop and clean them out. Buck sat his horse and watched the sickle-bar knife through the knee-high grass. The grass fell behind it and then the bluejoint lay straight on the damp soil. Joe Morgan stopped and Buck rode up.

"When can we rake this, Joe?"

Morgan got off his high seat and knelt and felt of the bluejoint. "Tomorrow morning, if tonight's wind is dry."

"I'll get Pipo Alvarado and Bill Tompkins on the rakes," said Buck. "They may holler some, claimin' they hired out to ride a horse, not a hay-rake, but I think I can talk them into it. They tell me jobs are scarce here in the fall, and it's a long, long, cold ride back to Texas."

Morgan smiled. "You got them over a hogs-head."

Buck rode back to the house. He let his horse hit a slow walk and he was frowning. Four thousand head of horses could eat a lot of hay. He had some hay here but he didn't have enough, especially if the winter got too severe. But it took money to buy hay, even though it was being sold cheap down south on the Musselshell River.

Pipo Alvarado and Bill Tompkins were putting

new posts in the fence around the back of the house. The digging was tough along the base of the gravelly hill. Alvarado wiped the sweat from his dark forehead.

"She ees hard work, Buck."

"Make you grow," put in Buck. He looked at Bill Tompkins, who was holding a diamond-willow post to put in the hole. "Ever drive a team of horses, kid?"

Bill Tompkins was openly suspicious. "Once or twice," he finally had to admit. "On the mess-wagon." He added hurriedly, "But ribbons don't fit well in my hands."

Buck looked at Alvarado. "How about you?"

"Once or twice. Why ask?"

Buck told them about the hay-rakes and the hay to be put into windrows. They hemmed and grunted, then finally gave in. "Hell of a thing to ask a saddleman to do," countered Bill.

"But how about me and Tin Ear and Trigg?" Buck reminded him. "We have to haul the stuff, pitch it in a hayrack and unload it."

Bill grinned broadly. "I'll be waitin' to see that!"

Tin Ear Jackson were mending harness and riding gear in the tool shed. Buck rode up and dropped his reins and dismounted. He squatted beside the ancient and the black man, silent and filled with

thoughts. They waited, and did not ask any questions.

"How much money you got, Tin Ear?"

The giant black man grinned broadly. "Foolish question, Lieutenant. I counted it last night, right afore I went to hit the hay. Four dollars an' thirty-seven cents, it was."

Buck had to smile. "And you, Pipo?"

"I got the twenty-five dollar een Juarez, Buck. I left eet there with Margerita Sanchez for her to keep eet for me."

Buck scowled. "Margerita Sanchez? Don't remember her. . . . Did she work in the *Cantina Juan*?"

"No, she dance een the *Cantina Morales*."

Buck winked at Tin Ear. "Write to her for that dinero, Pipo. We need it and need it bad."

"You theenk she steel got eet, no?"

"No!"

Pipo showed white teeth. "Me, I no theenk she has, either. That leaves me broke, as you say, un-teel you pay me my wages."

"And that," declared Buck, "might be a long time from now."

"I wait, Buck."

Tin Ear Jackson rolled heavy eyes toward Buck. "You mean to say we're that close to the border line, Buck? We plumb done flat?"

"We got a couple of hundred. But we need that, bad." He got to his feet. "Yeah, we need money and need it bad—especially if the winter breaks early and finds us without all our hay put up. And even if we do get the hay up we'll still need more, even if the horses can rustle a little bit back on the ridges."

"The bank," said Pipo. "Borrows some monies, no?"

"I'll see this Stebbins gent. Maybe I'll ride into town today. You want to go with me, Tin Ear?"

"You all ain't leavin' this boy behin', Lieutenant."

They roped fresh broncs and saddled them and pointed them west. When they came to the fork, they saw a rider coming from the south—a rider who loped along, sitting saddle lightly.

"A woman," breathed Tin Ear.

Buck murmured, "Nita Stebbins."

Nita Stebbins was riding a black and white pinto. The brightness of the horse's patchwork color only added more color to her. Buck thought, *She's a lovely woman . . . but I bet she could make a man's life plenty hectic if she made up her mind to.* He took off his Stetson.

"Miss Stebbins, meet Mr. Jackson."

"How do you do."

"Nice to know you, ma'am," drawled Tin Ear.

"The lieutenant was telling me about meetin' you. Pshaw, you're prettier'n he said you was!"

"You men! You're all alike. I take it you're riding my way—into Missouri City, too."

Buck nodded.

They talked about various matters, none of them serious. Buck had an idea this girl was smarter than he thought; she was feeling him out. She was trying to get him to talk and he decided against it.

Tin Ear rode slouched in the saddle, putting in a few words now and then.

Buck smiled. "You playing any more of that Buffalo William game, Miss Nita, like you played on me the other day?"

Nita flicked a horsefly from the pinto's shoulder, using the tip of her quirt. "I guess you and Jay Rolling had some trouble, didn't you?"

"He had men on my ranch."

"Jay's all right—"

"Yes, he undoubtedly is," declared Buck. "But his place, and his job, isn't on my Quarter Circle Lazy S."

Her eyes clouded momentarily. "Dad has great plans, and sometimes he appears just plain greedy. Maybe he'll drop them. Let's hope so."

They came into town. Nita turned to the hitchrack in front of the Millinery Shop. "So long, men."

Buck and Tin Ear dropped reins in front of the Cinch Ring saloon.

Marshal James strolled up. "How goes it, Buck?"

"All right, if it doesn't snow too early."

James squinted at the horizon, then gave up. "Nobody, not even God, can predict Montana weather. Run into any trouble any place?"

Buck told him about running the two N Bar 5 men off his place. James frowned, asked for details, said, "You did it within your rights, Talbert. If they wouldn't go, you had legal right to use force against them." He sighed heavily. "Have a drink on me?"

"Just one."

They went into the Cinch Ring. Buck and Tin Ear ordered rye and James took a bottle of beer. "There may be trouble," said the lawman.

Buck shrugged. "Not from Pike Mooney, James. He was over a day or so ago and we had a powwow. I think we look through the same eyes and we'll get along all right. But I don't know about the N Bar 5."

"Neither do I," added James.

They drank up and James wandered over to watch a listless poker game. Buck and Tin Ear went outside. Nita Stebbins' pinto still stood in front of the millinery shop. Buck said, "Well, I guess we'll

go over and get down on our knees in front of that damned banker, Tin Ear."

"Ah don't like bankers, Lieutenant."

Buck shrugged. "Neither do I. But they kind of got us straddled over a picket fence lined with cactus on the top rail. We got four thousand head of horses and we need some hay."

"If we'da stayed in Texas, we wouldn'ta needed no hay."

"That goes back to Appomattox," said Buck. "If we'd've won the war, we wouldn't be here now . . . but we didn't."

The sun outside was rather warm, and it was cool inside the bank. John, the sallow-faced clerk, came to the window, and Buck told him who he was and introduced Tin Ear, who stood looking absent-mindedly around the place. "You'll have to see Mr. Stebbins," said John.

"Where is he?"

"Upstairs. You go around to the back and climb the stairs."

Buck and Tin Ear went around to the alley and climbed the stairs. Buck knocked on the closed door and then a man's voice said, "Come in."

Deacon Stebbins sat on a hard-backed chair. His violin lay on a stand beside his right hand and his music rack stood a few feet away. He got up, hob-

bling slowly, and gestured toward two chairs. "Will you be seated, gentlemen?"

Buck and Tin Ear sat down. Stebbins went painfully back to his chair. "You're Buck Talbert," he said. "I've seen you on the street. But the colored gentleman—?"

"Tin Ear Jackson," said Buck.

Stebbins swung around and peered at the Negro. "The prizefighter, huh? I've read about your champion fight, sir, and I want to congratulate you."

Tin Ear muttered, "Thank you."

Buck spoke with a slow deliberateness, "As you know, I bought the Trander place, and have four thousand head of horses out there. Frankly, I haven't got enough hay for them and—"

"You want to borrow some money from the bank?"

"That's it."

Deacon Stebbins stroked his blue-shaven jaw with a scraggly hand. "How much money do you need, Mr. Talbert?"

"Hay sells for eight dollars a ton south on the Musselshell River, according to Pike Mooney." He saw that Deacon Stebbins glanced up at the mention of Mooney's name. "Five hundred ton—maybe less—should do the trick. If we have a late winter and some Chinook winds, it will be less than that.

Let's put the sum at four thousand dollars."

"And your security?"

"My ranch and my horse herds." Buck felt a sudden irritation. "That should be enough, if not too much."

Stebbins said, "One of them would be enough." He was silent then. "As you know, I tried to buy the Trander ranch and Trander would not sell it to me. Would you sell it?"

"For fifty thousand, yes."

Deacon Stebbins smiled faintly. "Too much—out of the question. Yes, I'll lend you that sum." He hobbled to the wall. He slipped back a panel and called down a tube. "John, bring up the papers for a loan." Then he added, "And bring all the Talbert and Trander information you have."

Soon they heard the clerk on the back stairs. He brought a copy of a mortgage, and some manila envelopes, and then left.

Buck asked, "What's your interest rate?"

"Twenty-five percent."

Buck got to his feet. "No deal, mister. You hit the wrong party."

Stebbins asked, "Then how will you buy hay?"

Buck was silent.

Stebbins tapped the envelope with a talon-like forefinger. "I got information on you from Pueblo,

Colorado, and I got some from your bank in Texas. You're broke, Talbert, and you have only credit at this bank. The army needs cavalry horses, broken or unbroken. There's an army man down at the hotel now looking for horses. But you haven't any to sell. All you have are a few hotblood studs, mares and long colts."

Buck said, "You banks work together, huh?"

Stebbins leaned back in his chair, suddenly tired. He closed his eyes. "Is it a deal, Talbert?"

"Hell, no."

Stebbins stayed with his head back, his eyes closed. Tin Ear went out first, grumbling under his breath, and Buck, when he went out the door, glanced back. Deacon Stebbins had not opened his eyes.

A heavy anger gripped Buck. *The damned robber*, he thought, *he doesn't even use a gun*. He and Tin Ear went out to the main street. James was still whittling in front of his office. Buck nodded absently and went into the only hotel in town. He asked the clerk where the horse-buyer was.

"Up in his room, I guess. Number 12."

They went down the hall. The army man—a captain—was stretched out on his bed. Yes, he'd buy every good horse Buck ran into the corrals. Fifty dollars a head for top saddle stock, with the rest running down to thirty.



Buck said, "I might take you up on that, Captain."
The man sat up. "Where is your stock?"

"Haven't run it in yet. When will you come through here again?"

"I'm stationed here for six months, at least."

Buck and Tin Ear left. Tin Ear shoved back his battered hat and scratched his fuzzy head. "Now where, Lieutenant, am we goin' get these hosses?"

Buck didn't answer. He sat down beside James. "How many head of Trander horses do you figure run north of the Missouri, James?"

"Maybe a hundred head. Around that. Why ask?"

"We're going to round them up and sell them."

James shook his head reflectively. "Might be quite a chore. Damned slants a man can hide a city in, over in those badlands. You start falling down one and you'll fall for quite a spell. Need dinero, huh?"

"Who doesn't?" asked Tin Ear.

"Horse thieves must've run those broncs over there," commented James. "Then they must've lost the herd in the night and just abandoned the horses. Ought to be some tough stock over there. No hay in the winter and rustling bunch-grass—that makes hardy horses, 'cause the weak ones die off."

Nita Stebbins and a man were walking toward them. Nita nodded to them, but the man made no motion. They passed and James said, "That was

Jay Rolling with her. They're goin' to get hitched, I guess. Deacon Stebbins thinks heaps of that daughter, and Jay Rolling had better step light."

"He wants the ranch, I reckon?"

James said, "Looks like he aims to marry it." He smiled. "Cheaper than buying one, Buck."

Buck remembered Jay Rolling's arrogance. "I'd rather pay cash," he said.

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SEVEN

Nita went into the Mercantile, and Jay Rolling said, "See you again, Nita," and went to the bank. He glanced in and nodded to John, who returned his greeting sourly, and he saw that Deacon Stebbins was not in the building. He was going to ask if he were upstairs, and then he heard a violin take up its vibrant song above him.

"You get lots of music, John."

"Too much."

Rolling went to the back and slowly climbed the stairway. Things and circumstance were moving fast on this wide Missouri River range. He had the sudden impression that something big and significant, like a strong, direct wind, was running across the sagebrush and bending the buffalo grass, and he

could not lay his finger upon it or its cause. This problem had spread out and taken in greater areas and the plan was not clear to him as yet.

He entered without knocking.

Deacon Stebbins' bow stopped, the music hung, then died. He lowered his violin, and his dark eyes were savage with unvoiced thoughts. Jay Rolling saw this and anger went through him, but the goal was worth more than the game and he held it back.

"Can't you knock, Jay?"

Rolling was apologetic. "Didn't figure you could hear my knock above your fiddle, Deacon." He took a seat, lounging in the chair.

Stebbins put his violin on his thighs. "What do you want?"

"I saw that new man, Buck Talbert, and his Negro on the street, and Nita said they had been in to see you."

"They wanted a loan."

Rolling paused, thought, asked, "Did they get it?"

"No. They didn't like my rate of interest." Deacon Stebbins plucked a string on his violin. The sound was sharp and then died.

"He's got good horses. They got good legs. Come a dark, snowy night and those horses can drift into Canada . . . with a little help. And the

snow and night will cover everything forever, Deacon."

Deacon Stebbins hit another string. This time the sound was shriller. It hung across the room, lay vibrant in the air, fell back.

"Might snow soon, Deacon."

Deacon Stebbins looked up from his brooding. Rolling saw that the cripple's eyes were bright points. "But you got to be careful, Jay. This isn't Trander—or Pike Mooney—we're dealing with. Talbert is quick and he can handle that gun. Trander was stupid, just plain stupid. Pike Mooney is a big man with a small brain and a big tongue. But Buck Talbert is no fool or braggart."

"Snow covers any trail."

"Mooney and Talbert are lining up, from Talbert's talk. We got to break that, Jay, and break it quick. We have to keep them hot against each other, or this might swing back on to us."

Rolling considered. "I've got a plan, Deacon."

"Yes?"

"It should work," Rolling got to his feet lazily. "We got the tally complete on the cattle you run, Deacon." He handed him a piece of paper he took from his vest pocket. "There are all the figures. We run quite a few more than last year this time, due to this year's heavy calf crop. We need more range."

"We'll get it."

When Rolling went down the back stairs, the violin was singing again. This time the song was light and quick, though, instead of dark and heavy. Rolling thought, *if he only knew what a big lie those figures I handed him were he wouldn't be playing like that.* . . . He went to the street and went along it, noticing that Deputy Sheriff James still sat in front of his office. He went into the Tailholt Restaurant and took a stool and ordered a cup of coffee. He rolled a spoon in it, his forehead showing his thoughts. He drank and paid and went outside.

Again, he noticed only James on the street.

He went between two buildings and came out on the alley. He settled back, watching the tin-can littered, dirty strip. Then he crossed quietly and turned the knob on the door of the little house opposite and entered, closing the door and locking it behind him. Mona was eating and she looked up, surprised. She wore a print housedress and her hair was in a neat bun.

"Why, Jay! Gosh. I didn't expect you until— You shouldn't come in here in the daytime. What if somebody—what if Deacon Stebbins—saw you?"

"Nobody saw me."

He held her close and kissed her. She was limp then in his arms, and her lips were warm. "I was

16748

down to the restaurant," he said, "but saw you weren't there. Did you work late last night?"

"There were quite a few in town, so we stayed open late. I was just going down to the place to be there at supper. Are you hungry?"

He glanced at the coffee pot. "Well, I could eat."

She hooked her arm in his. "You hungry man. You're always hungry." Sobriety swept away her gayness. "Jay, when are we going to leave? You've got money enough—don't carry this thing too far, Jay."

"We raid this winter, Mona. Then, when spring comes—"

"But you said that last winter, too!"

He said, "Don't press me, woman. I'm carrying a tough load as it is." He was grave and quiet. "Nita, damn her soul! But I have to carry it through. . . ."

"If her father finds out—"

"Hush, now. He won't find out, Mona."

He left her place at dusk. She had gone out earlier, going to her restaurant, and he sat there and watched the shadows group and darken the small room. This room was a part of her: her perfume on her dresser, and her personality had been woven into the walls and the air of it. He thought, *This winter and then we leave*, and then he added, *Unless some-*

thing happens and Deacon Stebbins dies. . . .

With Deacon Stebbins dead and out of the way, he could control the mighty N Bar 5. And he wouldn't have to marry Nita to do it. He could run the spread to the ground, get her discouraged, and then have some outside agent—under his control—buy it with his money—money obtained by selling cattle stolen from Deacon Stebbins. Then, after Nita had gone, he could come out as the real owner.

He explored these thoughts.

When it was dark, he slipped outside, went to the livery and got his horse. He rode out into the raw, wild blackness with the sharp wind reaching through his brush jacket. He had a sheepskin coat tied behind his cante, and he untied this and donned it, and that cut the wind.

He gave his big black its head, letting the bronc run with the wind. He was tight in leather and there was tension in him. This plan wasn't sweeping away. He had hold of it, now; he held it under his thumb, he was the master again. He had found the answers to some of the conjectures.

He did not head toward the N Bar 5. He followed the north road, riding along the banks of the Missouri. The water gurgled and lapped against the gumbo below him. He pulled the black to a run-

ning walk. Here the road left the river, moving south into the hills, and he left the beaten trail then, still following the river.

An hour later he turned into the willows. The black knew the trail, and he followed it, splashing across the shallow water of the slough, the cattails and rushes brushing his belly. Finally the sound of water under the black's hoofs died and Jay Rolling thought, *We're across the neck and coming out on the dry land and I hope Jess and Quigley and the others are at the hideout.* He rose on stirrups and peered ahead, but the willows and cottonwoods were too thick and too high, and if there was a light in the cabin he could not see it because of their interference.

Bullfrogs were singing ahead of him. That told him that no riders had recently traversed this trail; otherwise, the bullfrogs would be silent, just as they fell to silence when he rode by. The wind had died, blocked out by the heavy trees, and he smelled the raw, muddy river.

He came to the clearing. He could see the cabin ahead. It was dark. He left his horse there, reins dragging, and went ahead on foot, hanging to the willows.

A man spoke from the cabin. "Who goes there?" Quigley's voice. "Jay Rolling, Hump." He came

forward openly. They were seated along the cabin. Quigley first, then Jess, then Quigley's two riders. And Rolling felt the tug of anger.

"I might have killed you, if you hadn't spoke."

Quigley laughed softly. "If you—or somebody else—doesn't kill one of us, I guess we'll live till we die." He got to his feet and his height turned toward the open door. "Let's go in here and hold this medicine circle."

"Just a minute," said Rolling. "Hold that match." Old saddle blankets hung over the two small windows. He saw they were adjusted properly. He settled on his haunches against the wall beside the closed door. Here they would all be in his sight. "All right; light it now."

The match flared, touched the wick of the kerosene lamp, caught and showed its yellow light around the log cabin. Quigley pulled up a chair and sat down heavily for all his thinness. Jess settled down on his spurs and the other two riders squatted beside the stove.

Rolling shook tobacco into a brown paper. "I got word from that cattle buyer today, man. Sent me a letter. His company credited your accounts in that San Francisco bank. I got the slips and amounts here." They had a rubber band around them. He tossed them to Hump Quigley, who broke the

band and handed a slip to each man. When Quigley looked up from his, his eyes were sharp.

"Easy money, Jay."

Rolling licked his cigarette. "And more where that is, men." He walked to the lamp, took off the chimney, touched his cigarette to the flame. When the smoke was drawing he replaced the chimney. It had been hot and he rubbed his fingers against his chaps. "Saw Deacon Stebbins today."

"Just a minute." Quigley still studied his deposit slip. "Deacon Stebbins is a banker. These banks are more or less connected—what one banker knows the other knows. Now what if this Frisco bank—"

Jay Rolling's voice was dry. "You talk like a locoed buck Injun. That Frisco bank prob'ly has only about a hundred thousand depositors. They have your money and they pay you two percent on it and lend it out for ten. They won't do any hollering—they'll just sit back and wait for more deposits."

"Hope you're right."

Rolling felt the pull of impatience. He told them about Buck Talbert and Tin Ear Jackson being in Missouri City that afternoon, how Buck had tried to borrow money from Deacon Stebbins, how he and Deacon had disagreed.

"What's he goin' to do for hay money?" asked Jess.

"He's got an ace in the hole," muttered Jay Rolling. He dragged deep on his cigarette and jetted smoke from his nostrils. "Horses, north of the Missouri—wild horses. He figures to round those up, sell them to the army buyer down in Missouri City—"

"Doubt if he can do it," said Hump Quigley. "Those hills and cuts over there are straight up and down, and a coyote would have to dig a ledge to sit on to howl at the moon. Him and his riders'll fall off a few of them and give up and go home."

"He's got good horses," Jess reminded him, "and he's got good hands. Texas is a hell of a long way off, Hump, and they brought four thousand head of horses up the trail, and it takes a good trail boss and good hands to do that. Don't ever forget that, fella. I've pounded longhorns up that trail and I know."

"Yeah," said Rolling. "It might be done."

Quigley cut in. "But who will put up the hay he has down—the hay he has to cut? He needs that. He needs every spear of bluejoint and alfalfa he can get. Him and his crew can't be two places at once. They can't stage a roundup over in that rough country and be home putting up hay at the same time."

Jess said, "Hump's right, Jay."

Rolling pinched out his cigarette. "Pike Mooney has men and this is a slack season for some of them. Pike's got his hay up. What if he lent some hands to this Texas man to put up hay while Talbert pounded broomtails out of the hills?"

Quigley frowned. "Would Pike help him?"

"I think so."

"I guess he would," said Quigley suddenly. "Laurie and old Pike and this Texas man have had a number of confabs together lately. Me, I sort of think Laurie is going for him, if she ain't too stubborn to go for anybody. We got to get Pike and Talbert looking at each other across pistols, but how?"

"Luck is with us," muttered Rolling.

They studied him. "Explain yourself," asked Jess.

Jay Rolling drew his right forefinger across the dirt floor. He made a Quarter Circle in the dust and under it he drew a Careful Lazy S—an S that lay on its side.

"Talbert's brand," he said. "Right shoulder."

They watched closely.

Rolling's forefinger continued. He drew the end of the Quarter Circle out and looped it around and had a complete Circle. Then he drew another Lazy S over the old one and he had an 8.

"Mooney's iron," he said. "Right shoulder."

They looked at each other understandingly. Quigley was the first to speak. "But it looks so damned apparent, Jay. Same shoulder and just a little work with a hot iron to run Talbert's brand into Pike Mooney's. Hell, the deputy—Martin James—he was even talking about it, down in Missouri City. From what I understand, when Buck Talbert brands in the spring, he uses the same iron but puts it on the left shoulder."

"It'll work."

"Why and how?"

Rolling was patient. "It's the only chance we got without going to guns, Hump. We better try this anyway. Who the hell would think anybody but Pike Mooney would run his iron on one of Talbert's long colts?"

Quigley studied the floor thoughtfully.

Jess said, "We can try—anyway. Won't cost nothin'."

Rolling got to his feet. "We'll pick out a weaned colt, one that isn't sucking his mother. We'll run him in with Mooney's herd and chances are he'll work back home again. Then when he gets in with his bunch again this Texan will see him and raise hell with Mooney."

Quigley said, "Hope it works."

"Meet me tomorrow at Big Springs," said Jay



Rolling. "I saw some of Talbert's mares over there. No, make it day after tomorrow—tomorrow I have to ride bog holes. Hump, you're enough. Me and you'll iron this critter. Be there about noon, huh?"

"All right."

Rolling put out the light and followed them outside. Coming from the lighted interior made the night seem darker. But after a while his eyes grew accustomed to the lack of light. They rode south, crossing the neck of water, and when they reached the road Hump Quigley said, "I'll meet you there, then," and he and his two men drifted off, heading for the Circle Eight.

Rolling and Jess pushed through the night. Neither man spoke until they had turned their horses loose in the pasture below the ranchhouse. Jess said, "Good night, Jay," and went into the darkened bunkhouse.

Rolling grunted.

Standing there, he looked at the house, noting the light in the living room. He was turning away, ready to go to his bunk in his cabin, when Nita Stebins came running down the path, hurrying toward him.

"Jay, is that you?"

"It's me, Nita."

She hugged him. "Where have you been, Jay?"

You weren't in town—I looked all over for you—why didn't you tell me you'd leave soon? I wanted to ride home with you. I searched and looked and asked Dad about you."

"I rode south and looked at some cattle on Down Crick."

"You must be cold, Jay. Minnie has some hot coffee."

Rolling considered that. He was tired and cold and he wanted to go to bed, but he had to play the game. He put his arm around her and they walked to the house. Nita chattered while Minnie poured the coffee.

The coffee hit the spot. Minnie stood in the kitchen doorway, and when he looked up her eyes were sharp on him.

He said, "Good coffee, Minnie."

She lifted massive shoulders, let them fall. "Glad you like." Her eyes were sharp again.

EIGHT

Trigg Jones had been right. True to the ancient's prophecy, Montana's Indian summer had arrived. The days were bright and clear. Except for a sharpness in the wind, it seemed like spring. But old-timers knew that it could last only so long, and then winter would come down from the northwest.

It would come some night. You would wake up in the night, conscious of a sudden cold in the room, and you would hear the wind hitting against the house—only this time, it carried snow with it. And in the morning the blizzard would be raging, moving across the snow-covered wilderness.

Cattle would drift down into the valley to get to feeding pens. Horses would move back on the higher ridges where the wind swept the soil bare

and left a few outcroppings of bunchgrass. The deer along the river would stick close to the woods in the daytime and wander out at night to eat what the cattle had left—if anything—on the feed lots. And if the barbed wire fences around the haystacks were not too high, the deer would jump them and feed out of the stack.

Punchers would ride out on stout, grain-fed horses, hazing the weak cattle out of the hills and down to the corrals and the haystacks. They would throw out blocks of salt and haul hay and shovel it to the hungry, bawling dogies.

Buck Talbert had his crew cutting hay. They ran the two mowers from dawn to dark. Joe Morgan and John Haight rode them mornings and Trigg Jones and Tin Ear Jackson took the seats at noon. Pipo Alvarado sharpened sickle-blades, using the sandstone grinder. When he wasn't doing that, he was either riding a rake or pitching the hay into hayracks, of which they had two. Weasel Gordon, the wizened cook, pitched into one wagon and Bill Tompkins did the stacking.

Buck said, "We need a bigger crew, Tin Ear."

The solid Negro grinned crookedly. "Look at them cow-dogs out there," he said in wonder. "Down in Texas they wouldn't soil their hands by doing a farmer's work, but they sure am pitchin' up here

with that hay, Lieutenant. Sure, we need more crew—more mowers, more rakes, and more hayracks and more hands. But where am we goin' get them, Lieutenant?"

"Pike Mooney's got some men just loafing around."

The black man spat on an ant. "Yeah, he sure has. His hayin' season is done over, Ah understan's. Wonder if Pike would pitch in with us on this little chore?"

"Hate to ask him," said Buck.

The hayrakes were way ahead of the stackers and pitchers. Buck was working it that way. After putting the bluejoint in windrows, the rakes came along and bunched it, making huge haycocks dotting the meadow. Buck's logic was simple. He doubted if they would have time to get the hay into stacks. If they didn't have, then the hay would at least be in huge bunches, and therefore it would be easier to handle with snow on it than if it were in small windrows.

"Might be a short, easy winter," he told Trigg Jones. "And it might be that our horses can rustle enough feed back in the hills."

"Could be," agreed Trigg. "Of course, a horse can rustle lots better than a cow, but they've got to have some outside hay if the snow gets too deep—

they can't paw it away if it gets too deep. 'Nother thing is: if it chinooks and gets water on grass, and then this water freezes—a horse digs down to ice and can't get through it and has to be fed hay."

"You know this northern range pretty well, Trigg."

Trigg nodded his head thoughtfully. "I been though it, Buck. You gotta feed in this country. That's a mistake made by a lot of southern outfits that trailed cattle into Montana territory. Down in Texas and New Mexico a cow can rustle all winter—she ain't got the cold to fight. But up here, with this cold weather in the winter, a cow has to have hay, or she'll go under. A horse can handle the cold better, but he has to be fed if it gets too tough."

"Sure looks like summer now."

Again Trigg Jones shook his head. "This Injun summer is like a pretty woman. Nice to look at and a joy to a man's eye but she's tricky and mean. Smiles today with the sun a-beamin', and hell-roaring blizzard tomorrow."

Their days were long, tedious. Up before sunrise, breakfast. Then, harnesses slapping down on work-broncs; the rattle of tug chains. An hour before noon, Weasel Gordon would slip to the cook-shack, get the dinner meal. Young Bill would scrub dishes. Then, out again on the hay-fields with

mowers and rakes and hayracks. Buck worked with the rest.

He told Tin Ear. "We gotta have help, fellow. We've got to round up those horses across the river."

"Let's ride over that way, Buck."

They crossed the Missouri at Duck Point. Swam their broncs across the muddy, silty river. The horses were wild and boggered at the drop of a hat. They saw the men; a stallion trumpeted on a high ridge. Wild mares were breaking the brush with their spring colts following them. Wheeling and running, stampeding and nickering to their colts to keep up.

The country was rough. A badlands. Multi-colored buttes splashed with orange and blue and indigo reared erect from gullies and coulees. And these were thick with buckbrush and wild rosebushes. Buck and Tin Ear, just for an experiment, started after a wild bunch.

Buckbrush popped back and stung Buck across the cheek. His horse plunged through a thicket of wild rosebushes. Their thorns tore against Buck's chaps and slipped along the horse's flanks. Buck pulled in, horse blowing hard.

"Can be done." His eyes were slitted. "We work from the high country, spilling the broncs down to

the river, then have flank riders and have these shove the wild ones into the Missouri. And when they swim across and reach the other side, they'll be in our horse pasture and ours."

Tin Ear thumbed a cauliflower ear. "Yeah, that's so, Lieutenant. But the thing is to get them down to the river. Onct we get them in the water, they're our ponies, Ah reckon."

"Got to ride light," said Buck. "Have a remuda of fresh horses but no mess-wagon." He looked at the surrounding badlands. "Couldn't get a mess wagon in here. It'd fall off'n one of these buttes and smash to splinters."

They rode back to the river. They came across a trail, twisting through the badlands, and Buck drew in and looked at it carefully. "Cattle been moving across this, Tin Ear. Cattle, going north." He looked north across the badlands at the Little Rockies. "Must be some wild stock that escaped from one of the Little Rocky spreads. They've gone wild and there must be a water-hole back yonder that they go to along this trail."

Tin Ear nodded.

They crossed the river again. Both were riding good swimmers, and their saddle seats were dry when they climbed the opposite bank. They dismounted and poured the water from their boots

and climbed up again. An unrest gripped Buck. Things were moving too slowly. He had been here over two weeks, anyway. Pike Mooney had come up and spoke his piece, and he and Pike each knew where he stood with the other man. Deacon Stebbins, though, was different.

And yet, in two weeks, Stebbins hadn't moved against him.

Buck thought of that and pondered on it. Jay Rolling was not one to forget and, for that matter, neither was Hump Quigley. Yet Quigley's boss, Pike Mooney, had come out openly, saying he wanted no range war. How did that set with Quigley? Buck remembered the hate that had been in the Circle 8 foreman's eyes down there in the Custer Bar, when Buck had hit him.

And Deacon Stebbins? Buck thought he knew the answer there. Stebbins was smart, and he would bide his time. Then, when that time came, Stebbins would strike in the hardest, and the best, manner and place. Now the banker was sitting down in Missouri City, waiting to see if he could get the herd through to the army buyer. For if Buck didn't make that deal, then he would be forced to borrow money from Deacon Stebbins—at the banker's interest rates . . .

Tin Ear drawled, "Been quite a few days since

we rode aroun' an' looked at our horses, Lieutenant."

They had turned the mares and colts in the southern foothills that ran along the edge of the hay meadows. Here, on the high open range, there was still some feed, but not too much, because Deacon Stebbins' cattle had grazed on this grass. Buck had understood this territory to be Trander range, and therefore he, by right of purchasing this ranch from Trander, had thereby got the unwritten privilege of using this graze. Once he had caught a couple of Stebbins' riders on that section.

"You men ain't got no duty on this grass," he had said, his hand on his gun. "You've got some cows and calves over in the next draw. Haze them south onto Stebbins' land and do it right pronto. And remember this is Quarter Circle Lazy S grass, not N Bar 5."

The two riders had been silent, eyes heavy.

"You heard the lieutenant," Tin Ear Jackson had added. "Now turn them ol' crowbaits you're astraddle and circle them dogies and bust 'em toward your own graze. Now get a move on, you two."

"Deacon Stebbins might have a say to this," growled one. "And it won't sit purty with Jay Rolling, either."

"That's all right with us," Buck had put in. "Re-

member this, and tell it to Rolling and Stebbins—no N Bar 5 riders are supposed to be on our grass.”

“Nice neighbors, huh?”

Buck said patiently, “I wanted to be on good terms with Stebbins and Rolling, and they didn’t want it. So start romping those cows and calves toward home.” He and Tin Ear had sat there and watched until the two riders had turned the cattle onto Stebbins’ graze.

Buck said, “They didn’t like it, Tin Ear.”

Tin Ear was darkly serious. “No, they sure didn’t, Lieutenant.”

Buck was thinking of this now as they rode into the hills. “You seen any Stebbins men on our range lately, Tin Ear?”

“Nary a one, Buck.”

“Maybe we scared ’em out.”

“Reckon so. Hope so.”

The mares, tired from the long trail, had stayed close to water holes and the shade, resting from their long trek. Most of them had gone dry on the trail and thereby had automatically weaned their spring colts. They stood switching flies in the cottonwoods and boxelders and looked up with pointed, inquisitive ears. But they did not run because they were not shy of riders.

“They’re puttin’ on meat,” muttered Tin Ear.

They went over the ridge and circled another band of mares and colts, there in a broad coulee. Buck had pulled the studs out of the herd and had them in a pasture down on the river bottom. Buck pulled up suddenly, and looked at one colt. He was a long-legged, good-looking horse and he would make a good one under a saddle, but Buck was not admiring his build.

His voice held awe. "Do you see what I see, Tin Ear?"

Tin Ear stared, looking at the colt's brand. "Hell, that ain't no Circle 8 colt! Ah remembers that young un well. Mind when we cross the Hell River? This young button had a whale of a time swimming, almost drowned. That's our colt, not Pike Mooney's!"

"But he packs Mooney's brand."

Tin Ear was taking down his rope. He shook out a loop slowly. "Let's look that brand over, Buck." The colt, used to riders, had started to graze again. The Negro rode close, loop hidden behind his hors, and the colt lifted his head in curiosity. The loop settled around his neck and the colt, scared now, lit out on the run. He hit the end of the rope and spilled himself hard.

Buck was down with a short piece of rope. He tied the colt's front legs and one hind one. The

colt whinnied and kicked with his free leg. Then he lay still while the black man and Buck looked at his brand.

Tin Ear ran a thick, speculative finger around the newly-burned brand. "Feels to me like a Circle 8 has been run over a Quarter Circle Lazy S. Of course, we could tell if we killed him and skinned him. The old brand would show clear if you scraped the inside of the hide."

"Too nice a colt to kill." Buck looked at the brand carefully. "Yeah, you're right, Tin Ear. You can see where the iron hasn't hit the old brand exactly. See, there the old brand shows!"

Tin Ear looked at him. "What'd you suppose Mooney ran his iron on our colt for? You really figure he aimed to steal him? And if he did, how come the colt is in with our mares—why didn't Pike Mooney keep him with his?"

"You got me."

"What'll we do with him? Lead him over to Mooney's and call the old gent's hand. That'll mean some trouble, Buck"

Buck considered. "The colt ain't halter broke and we'd have to almost drag him until he got so he could lead. No, we'll turn him loose and ride over and see Pike Mooney."

They took the piggin' string loose and the catch

rope. The colt got up and loped away. He went over the hill on a high run, his tail in the air. Tin Ear coiled his manila, his massive face ponderous. Buck tied his piggin' string to his saddle and stepped up.

Both said little on the ride to the Circle 8.

The sun was high when they came to the ranch house. They left their horses with dragging reins and went up the graveled walk. Pike Mooney saw them coming and left his easy-chair on the porch and came to the steps. Laurie was reading a book and her mother was peeling potatoes.

"Come in, come in," invited the horse-raiser. "Cooler inside the house, men. Mother, could you rustle a cold bottle of beer for Buck and Tin Ear?"

"I'm sure I can."

Buck and Tin Ear came up on the porch. They stopped there, silent and tight. Pike Mooney felt their temper and studied them solemnly. Then he said, "I reckon you came over to see me about that colt, huh?"

Buck asked, "So you knew about him? You're not telling me you've branded him, Mooney?"

Pike Mooney's heavy face showed puzzlement. "No, I didn't brand him and I don't know who did. I found him a few days ago, wearing my fresh iron, over in my south pasture. First I thought some

of my men had made a mistake, if a rider can make a mistake that plain. But nobody knows anything about it. Here comes Hump Quigley now. You can ask him if you want to."

Buck said, "Your word's good, Mooney."

Quigley leaned back against the porch pillar. "Was over in south pasture, Pike, and everything's all right over there." He nodded briefly at Buck and Tin Ear.

"These men came to see me about that colt," said Pike Mooney. "The one we found in our pasture branded with my brand—that Quarter Circle Lazy S colt."

Quigley murmured, "I see."

Buck saw that the foreman's eyes were emotionless. "Did you turn the colt loose, Mooney?"

"Sure. Chucked him outa my pasture. Turned him loose day before yesterday and I reckon he drifted home. Meant to ride over this evenin' when it cooled down some, and tell you about it."

Laurie had heard every word. "Who do you suppose branded the colt?"

Buck was studious. "Somebody is trying to get you and me to tangle, Mooney. They ironed your brand on my colt, figuring I'd get my dander up and brace you. Then they've run him into your pasture. They've figured that I would miss him—

he's marked so easily with that bald face and stocking-legs—and they put him in your pasture, wanting me to find him there.”

“That looks like it,” agreed Pike Mooney.

Tin Ear scratched his flat nose. Hump Quigley was silent, still standing with his back to the porch post. Mrs. Mooney had halted in the doorway, holding a tray that contained some opened bottles of cold beer.

“But you found the colt first,” said Buck, “and that broke up that section of the plan. . . .”

“Who would it be, though?” asked Quigley.

Laurie lay down her book and got to her feet. “I saw some of Deacon Stebbins’ riders hit across your range,” she told Buck slowly. “That was a few days ago; I don’t just remember.”

“They ain’t supposed to be on my graze,” said Buck.

Pike Mooney spoke. “If you and me matched guns, it would be to Deacon Stebbins’ good, Talbert.”

Quigley was silent. Tin Ear was muttering something under his breath.

“Maybe we better talk to Jay Rolling,” muttered Buck.

Pike Mooney buckled on his gun that had been laying on a chair. “Hold that beer until later, Ma,”

he said gruffly. "I'm going with Buck and Tin Ear and see what Rolling has to say. You better come along, Quigley. No, not you, Laurie. We don't want no female aroun' clutterin' up things for us."

Buck smiled. "He's right."

Laurie stuck out her tongue. "You're worse than Dad." A furrow appeared between her eyes, pushing her freckles together. "Damn it to hell—wups, excuse me, Mother! But why can't I go?"

"'Cause I won't let you," growled Pike Mooney.

Mooney and Quigley had two fresh horses in the barn. They slung up saddles and found stirrups. Mooney's bronc was a skittish gray that wanted to buck a little. The grizzled cowman wrapped his quirt savagely around the cayuse's belly and the bronc forgot he had ambitions.

Three hours later they rode into the Stebbins ranch. Men were drifting in from line-riding and bog-hole patrolling. Rolling was at the pump, washing his hands and face in the wash basin. Jess was with him.

"Trouble on the hoof," muttered Jess.

Rolling rubbed his face on the dirty roller towel. "Now what the hell—? You reckon that colt got us into trouble?"

"I don't know." Jess' tone was cynical. "I always

did figure it was a hell of a poor move and too much on the surface."

"Damn it," said Rolling huskily. "My gun's in the bunkhouse."

"So's mine."

Rolling leaned back against the bunkhouse, seemingly at ease. Jess hunkered, and his eyes were thin. They pulled in and Rolling said, "Long ride, men, long ride."

Pike Mooney said gruffly, "One of Buck Talbert's colts is wearing my brand, Rolling. Me, nor none of my punchers, put that iron on him."

Rolling studied him. "You implying that me, or some N Bar 5 rider, ironed your brand on a Texan's colt? Is that it, Mooney?"

"I'm not accusin' anybody," said Mooney. "I'm statin' a fact."

"You've had your say," declared Jay Rolling. He held his temper back. He looked at Tin Ear and Buck. "All right, what's on your mind, Texas men? You gave me orders to keep N Bar 5 horsemen off your graze, Talbert. Then what are you doing on mine?"

"That's it," said Buck. "Your men have been on my range."

"Yeah?"

"Keep off my grass."

Rolling spoke slowly. "I haven't got my gun, Talbert. I'll drag you off that bronc and beat your face in, so help me!"

Buck said, "You don't have to," and dismounted.

N Bar 5 men were coming on the run. One puncher hollered, "There's trouble!" and came running, buckling on his gun. Tin Ear Jackson moved his horse back about thirty feet, tightening the reins and pulling him backwards. The Negro held his .45 in his big black hand.

"Keep your shoulder up—that left one, Buck," the giant Negro purred. "'Member what Ah done showed you, Lieutenant. Stick that left out there, and bury your haid behin' your shoulder. He's got reach, so fight low down and come up."

Buck pulled off his gunbelt and handed it to Pike Mooney, who said, "Beat the cowhide out of the o'nery son." Hump Quigley's face was pulled with a strange whiteness.

Nita Stebbins and the squaw, Minnie, stood on the porch and watched.

Rolling came forward. His boots shuffled across the dry earth. Somebody said clearly, "We're with you, Jay!" and Rolling struck. Buck rode the blow on his elbow, his head low as Tin Ear had instructed.

Tin Ear Jackson said, "Now none of you boys try to get into this, or I'll pour some lead into your

briskets! Let them two fight it out and might the best man win. Be careful, boys, and forget you pack them pistols! There now, that's better—*mucho mas mejor!*"

Rolling was fighting savagely, and he was connecting. Buck settled down, fists up, fists working. Every bit of information given him by Tin Ear, every trick of the trade taught him by the Negro, came into use now, and he needed them, too. For Rolling was young and tough and had a fighting heart.

Buck felt salty blood on his tongue. Rolling missed a short, choppy left, and Buck came under it, pushing the blow off with his skull. He came in fast, burying his fists savagely—left first, right second. He heard Rolling grunt, and he knew he had hurt the big cowman.

Rolling gave ground. He went back grudgingly, making Buck pay for every inch. Buck's left eye was almost closed. He saw Rolling through blodshot lids, and he knew the eye would be closed soon. They had backed into the flower-bed beside the bunkhouse wall. Late sweetpeas and daisies were being torn beneath their boots.

"You're gettin' the big son, Lieutenant," hollered Tin Ear Jackson. "Dig your head lower, stick that left foot out—that's it, Lieutenant, that's it!"



Buck saw his opening. He put both fists in it and both connected. Rolling's eyes glazed, his knees buckled slightly. He had two courses: to retreat or to hang on. He came in, trying the latter, and Buck sidestepped, fists rising. Rolling went back and Buck followed relentlessly.

Rolling fell over the bench holding the washing equipment. The wash basin whammed against the pump and slid across the gravel with a clatter. The wooden bench smashed with the sharpness of a rifle report. Rolling went down.

Buck stepped back.

Rolling braced himself on his hands. He pulled himself up a little, then let himself fall.

Tin Ear said, "He's out, Lieutenant." He rolled his huge white eyes. "One of you N Bar 5 scissor-bills pour some *agua fria* on him. That's it, cowboy, work that pump handle. Buck, damn you, you kept your head too high. Otherwise, you'd never've glamourised that black eye, fellow."

Nita Stebbins and the squaw had come down the path. Buck looked at the girl gravely, marking her dark beauty. "I'm sorry about your flowers, ma'am."

"They'll grow again." She was kneeling beside Rolling, who was trying to get up. Water dripped from the N Bar 5 boss' leather jacket. "Don't, Jay, don't! Don't fight any more!"

Rolling said, "You men ride out, pronto."

Nita turned anxious eyes on Buck. "Please go, Mr. Talbert. Please."

Buck climbed up. He was stiff, tired. A great heaviness was in him. He looked at Minnie and the squaw said, "My flowers. I plant."

"Sorry," said Buck.

"They grow again."

They rode out. Buck said, almost wearily, "Who was that squaw, anyway?"

"Her name's Minnie. She raised Nita." Pike Mooney answered the question. "Nita's mother—dead. Why ask?"

"Did you see her eyes? She looked happy."

Pike Mooney grinned. "I ain't in the habit of lookin' in every squaw's eyes . . . that is, not at my age, anyway."

Buck grinned through split lips. "I don't figure she cottons much to this Rolling gent. Looked to me like she was glad I beat the big son up."

Mooney shrugged. "Can't tell about a woman."

16748

NINE

Hump Quigley lived alone in the foreman's shack. He was impatient that night, and he sat at the table, lazy in the rickety chair. A whiskey bottle stood on the table and it was one-half full. The dirty kerosene lamp with its soot-blackened chimney flickered and sputtered, showing the hands of the battered old alarm clock as standing at almost ten-thirty.

He thought, *About time to hit the trail*, and he turned down the light and killed it. He went to the door and stood there and looked into the night's darkness, and he was without taste for the ride which stretched ahead. The ranchhouse was dark and the bunkhouse was dark and down in the corral a horse nickered and then there came the sound of horses kicking each other.

Damn those studs, he thought.

He moved into the buckbrush, a thin, rawboned man who had fitted many saddles and seen many herds. He had a night horse tied in the brush—a big black gelding, a horse with a good bottom and good legs and who wanted to hit the trail. He stepped up and rode out, heading west.

When he got out of the brush, he rode at a long lope. He put his steel to the black and pushed through the night. He swung south, riding a few miles around the Quarter Circle Lazy S ranch. He thought, *Things are moving faster now, and they'll grow bigger from now on*. A rider came along the road that led south to the Stebbins N Bar 5.

Quigley pulled the black to a running-walk. He said, "Who rides there?" and the man came closer. Quigley had his hand on his gun, and then he took it back. *My nerves are going to pot*. "Hump Quigley talking."

The rider said, "Hang onto your hat, Hump. This is Jess."

"Thought you'd be at the shack," said Quigley.

"Had to ride the south line," said Jess quietly.

"Jay Rolling went into town this afternoon to talk with Deacon Stebbins. He'll meet us at the shack. Quite a fight the other day, huh?"

"That reb can handle his fists."

Jess said, "Rolling is good, too, but the reb was too fast. That is what made the difference. The reb was the fastest. And that coon had been showin' the reb some tricks—I saw that black man fight in Miami coupla years back. He has a roll in his shoulders, and a man's fists run off it, and he learned that to the reb. Sure was a tough one, though."

"How'd Jay take it?"

"What'd you mean? You saw the scrap. . . ."

Quigley's voice was severe. "I mean: Is Rolling mad, and does he aim to get back at the reb—or what is in the deck?"

"This basin ain't big enough for them two," said Jess in a deadly voice. "One of them has to die if he doesn't move."

"Talbert won't move."

"Then he'll die—or he'll kill Rolling. And Rolling is smart. When the time is ripe—when the bag is full—then Rolling acts. A bullet from the brush can kill a man without letting that man know who fired it."

"Rolling ain't too damned brainy," growled Hump Quigley. "Look at the mess we got into by branding that Talbert colt with old Pike Mooney's iron!"

Jess shook his head. "That sure was a slip-up," he admitted.

They rode a few miles in silence. In a way, Quig-

ley was glad for the company; in another, he had little use for Jess. A drifter who hired out for whatever was in it and whatever paid the most. But a dangerous man, for all that. The Circle 8 foreman let his musings grip him.

The game was holding up well. Neither Pike Mooney—nor any of his family—was suspicious of him. Had Mooney been suspicious, he would have come right out and voiced his opinions. Quigley mentally ran over in his mind the list of Missouri River basin folks who might know about his tie-up with Deacon Stebbins and Jay Rolling. And one by one he eliminated those people. No, they had a tight clan—each was in it too deep, and each knew that if the other got involved and talked, then it was time to pull out of the basin . . . if you were still alive.

Then he had a disturbing thought.

He said, "This Gros Ventre squaw—this Minnie woman— She hates Rolling, huh? Is that it, Jess?"

Jess looked at him. "What makes you ask that?"

Hump Quigley scratched his head and scowled in the darkness. He told Jess about what Minnie had said when Buck Talbert had finished whipping Jay Rolling. Jess grinned and spat.

"Hell, that don't mean nothin', Hump. Of course, that old girl cottons to Nita, but I sure don't figure

she hates Jay on 'count of that. Wonder if Jay will marry the girl? She's loco about him, the lucky son."

"Jay ain't the marryin' kind."

"Why say that?"

"Mind that little girl in the Tailholt Restaurant? Mona? Ever see Jay look at her? His eyes shine like black onyx."

Jess considered that. "Rolling's just playing a fast game," he finally concluded. "You can't expect a man to stay too close to home, can you?" He laughed at his joke, and Quigley smiled.

"No, you sure can't."

They rode into the area in front of the cabin and stepped down. The blinds were squarely across the window, and although no lamplight showed, Quigley had an idea that the lamp was lit inside. He turned suddenly with his hand on his gun as a man came from the brush behind him.

He took his hand back. "Mind how you come up behin' a man, Rolling!" he growled. "I damned near pulled on you."

"Just hidin' in the brush to check up," said Jay Rolling. "Somebody might just drift in, intending to sleep in this cabin—some puncher who doesn't want to ride all the way back into his camp."

"Very few men know about this cabin," said Jess.

Rolling said, "Deacon Stebbins is inside, men."

Quigley glanced around in the dark. "Where's his buggy?"

"Came out on horseback. Rode side-saddle. He figures it might be too risky to meet in town in the bank. Lots of stray eyes in a small town, and with him and Pike Mooney rubbin' horns, it wouldn't look good for Mooney's range-boss to hold a powwow with Mooney's bosom enemy."

They went inside. Deacon Stebbins sat on a raw-hide-bottomed chair against the far wall. He was small and dark and twisted, seated there with a sawed-off ten gauge shotgun leaning against the wall beside his chair. They exchanged howdys. Jay Rolling settled on his spur-shanks across the room, ten feet to Deacon Stebbins' right.

Hump Quigley booted up an old chair, righted it and sat down. He said, "I'm dry as a duststorm," and Jay Rolling slid the gallon jug across the floor to him. Quigley drank and wiped the jug's mouth and slid it to Jess, who was hunkered beside the stove. "Keep you warm, Jess."

"We could stand a fire," said Jess. "Cold in here."

"No fire," growled Deacon Stebbins. "With a straight stovepipe chimney like this one, there's a strong draft, especially when its windy. That would

shoot up flame with the smoke, and somebody might see it from a distance and come to investigate." The banker's tone was sharp. "Well, let's get down to business. I didn't ride all this distance to discuss the principles of physics that relate to drafts in a stove."

Rolling spoke. "What do you know, Hump?"

Quigley licked a cigarette into shape. The whiskey was hot in his belly. "Pike Mooney has most of his crew working for the Quarter Circle Lazy S putting up hay. Buck Talbert said he'd repay Mooney when he got the money. Mooney took him up on that."

"What's Talbert going to do next?" asked Stebbins.

Quigley sucked on his cigarette thoughtfully. "He's goin' across the river an' round up them broncs over there—them Trander broncs. I was over to the Talbert ranch today and Talbert and Mooney were talking over the roundup. Talbert and his crew pull out tomorrow, ridin' light with supplies in their saddlebags. While they're workin' the rough country, Mooney and us are going to put up Talbert's hay."

"I see. . . ." Deacon Stebbins stabbed a glance toward Jess. "And what have you to say, Jess?"

"Pike Mooney's got some nice two-year-old geldings over on Down Crick, Deacon. About fifty—

sixty head. They'd look nice in a corral over across the line in Canady with a Canadian hoss buyer writing out a check for them at fifty bucks apiece."

"They would," agreed the banker. "Anything else?"

"Well, just a ridge or two beyond these Mooney horses are some Talbert colts, long-legged beauties. They should be worth about thirty dollars on our Canadian market. Maybe more than twenty head."

"Would they be hard to bunch and get started?"

Jess grinned. "Not a bit, Deacon. Three of us boys could have them almost in Canady come noon of the next day."

Deacon Stebbins scowled. "Do that little thing—tomorrow night."

Hump Quigley spoke. "Yeah, but when we get them across the river—well, we'll have to haze them through country where Talbert and his men are working their horses, and if they hit their trail—or see us—"

"There's more than one crossing across the Missouri River," said Deacon Stebbins. "Swing east and cross at Elk Island. That way, you'll be twenty miles east of where the Quarter Circle Lazy S men are rounding up those broncs."

"We won't use Duck Point, then," said Rolling. "We'll cross at Elk Island. We might be gone for

about three days. How will that strike your boss, Hump?"

Quigley was serious. "I got some riding to do over along the ridges, Jay. I could tell Mooney I aimed to check up on our horses over there and stay nights in the line camps. He's busy with his haying. Me, I ain't handlin' a hayfork, and he knows it. We'll meet at Down Crick at dark, huh?"

"All right."

Deacon Stebbins glanced at Jess. "That all you know, fellow?"

Jess shrugged.

Deacon Stebbins looked at Jay Rolling. Rolling had a black eye and his bottom lip was slowly returning to normal. "What do you know, Jay?"

"Enough to know that the next time Talbert and me tangle, it won't be with fists—it'll be with guns." He let a battered, twisted smile brush his swollen lips. But beneath his banter was the solemn vein of hatred. "We misplayed with that colt idea; yeah, that sure backfired. But they still can't prove that we branded him. They might be suspicious, but they can't prove anything."

Deacon Stebbins' eyes glistened as he rubbed his pointed chin. "You're right on that angle, Jay." He hated Pike Mooney and he wanted Mooney's ranch. "We got Mooney down pretty low on good

stock. By this time, he might think somebody is rustling his range. What do you say to that, Hump?"

"Mooney doesn't do much riding, Deacon. He trusts to me to handle that end of the ranch, and he takes my tallies without questionin' them. Like you say, he might see that his stock is getting scarcer, but if he has he's never mentioned it to me that I can remember."

"He'll be around soon," murmured Deacon Stebbins. "He'll come in some day askin' for a loan again and I'll bust the news to him." He looked at them each, weighing them and hiding his opinion of them behind shrewd eyes. He had little friendship for any of them; they were hired hands, no more, no less. Of the three, only Jay Rolling had any place in his esteem, and that was because Jay was to marry his daughter. He had no high estimation of Rolling, either as to character or as a man, but Nita and money were the ruling powers of his life. His daughter and greed.

Nita wanted Jay Rolling. And because she wanted him, she would have him. She was like her mother. Deacon Stebbins thought of the woman whom he had married and who now was dead. He had loved that woman far above anything on earth; that woman had given him Nita, and if Nita would be happy with Rolling, then Deacon Stebbins would

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be content. But if Rolling crossed her. . . .

"You've all forgotten one point," he said.

Jess looked at Quigley. Quigley shrugged. Rolling was quiet for some time and then he said, "I guess I know what you mean, Deacon. If Talbert gathers those wild broomtails he can sell them for enough to pull his horses through the winter. And if he doesn't gather them, he's broke and he'll have to meet your interest for a loan. And if that happens, you've got him."

Quigley shifted, stretched his right leg. "We'll let them Texas rebs gather those broncs, and then we'll take them and shove them fast across the line and peddle them at Wood Mountain or some other Canadian town."

"Mask yourselves," said Deacon Stebbins, "and hit at night." His eyes were glistening now and his fingers were moving slowly against his bony knees. "Hay burns. And who in the hell can say how a haystack caught fire if it springs into flame in the middle of a blizzard that covers all tracks?"

"Green hay'll catch fire in a stack of its own accord," said Jay Rolling, grinning. "And this could happen to Talbert's hay right easily, I'd reckon. I was readin' somethin' once about hay catchin' afire like that but I can't remember what they called it."

Quigley said, "Spontaneous combustion."

"Never knew you knew a word that big," murmured Deacon Stebbins.

Quigley caught his anger in time. "Yeah," he said, smiling, "I can add a little, too."

Deacon Stebbins got to his feet. He hobbled across the room, carrying his shotgun. "Damned arthritis and rheumatism," he growled. "Damned stuff." He stopped and looked at the gallon jug of whiskey. "Cache that in the brush somewhere or take it home with one of you."

Rolling said, "I'll help you on your horse."

"Don't need no help." Rolling led the horse up. He found the stirrup and Deacon Stebbins put his boot in it. Rolling said, "Here, I'll hold your scatergun," but Stebbins jerked it back and slowly got into the side-saddle, still holding the gun. "Good night, gentlemen."

He rode into the darkness.

Rolling said, "Hump, hide the jug in the brush." He stood there and listened to the banker's retreating hoofs and then they died in the darkness. The night was still save for the wind, and it had no sound there in the clearing. When they rode out into the cottonwood trees the wind was singing a little, stirring the dry branches as their horses walked across the fallen leaves.

They rode to the fork together, three silent men. Hump Quigley left them there and went straight east with, "See you tomorrow night, men," and then he was gone. Rolling and Jess rode at a long lope toward the N Bar 5 to the south. Jess said, "I'm danged sleepy, Jay."

Jay Rolling said, "Yeah, so am I."

He thought of Deacon Stebbins, riding at a slow pace toward Missouri City. He remembered the crippled man's shotgun and his beady eyes. He thought, *He'd be a tough one to buck up against with that scattergun if a man ever got in close range. . . . Those things have a way of busting into a man and throwing his belly all over the scenery.*

They unsaddled and turned their broncs in on pasture. The night had gone far and both seemed possessed of a slow tiredness. Jess murmured, "We do more ridin' at night than we do at day," and went into the dark bunkhouse.

Rolling stood by the door. He looked at the night. This Indian summer should break soon, he figured, and then there would be snow. *One more winter of snow and then no more. It will be Guadalupe or Rio or Buenos Aires. . . .* He leaned back against the building and lit his cigarette.

Nita had heard them ride in. She came down the path, wearing a tight robe and slippers. "Where

have you been, Jay?"

He said, almost gruffly, "What are you doing out here at this time of the night?"

"I couldn't sleep. Minnie and I played cards."

"Oh."

"You haven't answered my question."

"I was talking to your father down in Missouri City." He felt irritation and anger, and he thought, *I'd better be more careful when I come in late and hit right for my shack.* "Where did you think I had been?"

"A woman's curiosity." Her laugh was deep and throaty. "Give me the makings and a match."

She twisted the cigarette with one hand and lit it. The flare of the match showed against her eyes, and for the first time Jay Rolling noticed that her eyes were like her father's—shrewd and keen and without much emotion.

TEN

The wind was raw and chilly that morning, coming from the northwest and the snowy hills and peaks of the Bearpaw Mountains. They had packed their saddlebags the night before, and they trooped into the cookhouse for breakfast. They were a sleepy crew and they were cold from the raw wind.

"Hell of a lookin' bunch," grumbled Weasel Gordon. "What if you had to get up as early as I did? Got up before I went to bed!" He tugged at one of his steerhorn *mustachios*. He had on a greasy shirt that had once evidently been white and a dirty dishtowel tied around his skinny waist served two purposes: as a belt and to protect his baggy pants from getting dirty. Though, as Bill Tompkins had said, his pants were already so heavy with grease and dirt that they could stand up alone, so

why did he wear the dirty dishtowel except as a belt? "Step up, you cow nurses, and grab some chuck. She's a long trail ahead and a tough one and God help the hinder!"

"Goin' snow some one of these nights," mumbled Trigg Jones. The ancient's rawhide face was purple with cold. "Then we'll spend our summer wages buyin' snowshoes or whatever they wear in the snow-bound desolation. Pass me them thar biscuits, Pipo? Give me another whack of that gristle they call sowbelly, too?"

"The weather," said Pipo Alvarado, "she ees not like the weather in Mexico, huh? Down there you do not need much clothes, but up here—" He fell to eating with great ado.

"You don't need blankets on this job," grumbled Tin Ear Jackson. "All you need is a lantern."

They ate and rode out toward the Missouri River. Weasel Gordon had stood in the doorway and watched them as they saddled. He was going to stay behind and cook for the Mooney hay-hands. Weasel looked at the dawn breaking in northern coldness and wondered if the day would be clear or cloudy. Had this been Texas, he could have prophesied correctly, but this wasn't Texas, and Weasel had a bunch of hungry hay-hands to cook for. He turned back into the cook shack.

They hit the river on the dead run, spurring their horses into the lazy stream. "We all shore cain't get no colder, Lieutenant!" hollered Tin Ear Jackson, and the big Negro drove his horse into the stream. Spray was splashing and flying and when it hit you it was cold. But after a while, you got wet all over and then it really seemed warmer than before you got soaked.

Now their horses were swimming. Because of his rider's great weight, Tin Ear's horse had hard swimming. The Negro slid from saddle and caught the horse's tail as he swam by. His big eyes and white teeth glistened as the horse towed him through the water.

"Jus' lay here plumb peaceful like, fellows. Don't even have to kick mah feet or paddle mah hands. Can do it with one hand, too." He held onto the horse's tail with his left hand and raised his right. "'Member that time we swum the river down in Dixie, Lieutenant, and the northern boys was shoot-in' at us, and we'd duck down and swim under water a ways, and then come up?"

"Could I forget it?"

"Funny thing about wahs," hollered Tin Ear. "Seems like a guy catches lotsa trouble in one, but you kinda look back over it an'—" A high ripple came along and filled his mouth with dirty water.

He spewed out the water and remained silent until his bronc started wading up the far bank. He stood on the bank and looked at the water dripping from his cowhide chaps. "Ah shore got wet to the hide, Lieutenant."

"You'll dry off."

Tin Ear shivered. "If I don't, Ah'll sure spend a miserable life." He climbed into his Lubbock kak and fitted his boots in stirrups. "Wup, Ah forgot to empty mah high-heels." He took off a boot and poured the water out of it. It landed inside the belt of Trigg Jones, who was bending over to take off his right boot. Trigg Jones jumped, hobbling on one foot, boot in hand.

"You African Cupid!" The ancient added a string of cuss words. "Here I ride high in my saddle. damned near standin' on the hull, just to keep my pants dry. Then when I reach the other side, plumb dry, you empty a boot down my belt!"

Tin Ear grinned good-naturedly. "Ah'll step down from this kak, Brother Trigg, an' Ah'll twist your neck around until when I let it loose you all spins like a top. An' Ah'll stand yere an' count the number of spins you make before you unwind."

"Humph!" said Trigg Jones.

The sun was peeping out of its hiding place. Buck pulled his sorrel around and looked at the badlands

behind them. "You boys can fight it out some other time and some place else," he said dryly. "Right now we got to run a few hosses out of the timber." He reviewed the procedure they would use in the roundup.

They would ride north in a body about thirty miles. That would put them at the base of the Little Rockies. There they would split up and fan out to the west and the east. They would ride the high country and thereby send the wild stuff south, feeding them down draws and gullies dotted with scrub-pine and buckbrush. In this manner the horses would automatically become a herd.

The broncs would not be able to sift through the circle riders and drift back north to their home range. And when night came they could corral them in a box canyon and either block the end with trees or tie ropes across it to hold the animals in. And if there wasn't a box canyon handy, they could hold them along the base of a gully, putting out night riders.

Each rider packed food enough in his saddlebags to last at least, even considering Tin Ear's appetite, for three days. The matter of fresh mounts was the puzzling point. Finally Buck had decided that maybe they could find some mares in the herd they were to gather, mares that had been saddle-

broke. For they were too short-handed to take some extra saddle-horses along and have a day-herder and a night-hawk ride guard on them.

Trigg Jones glanced at the sky. "Sure hope that snow puts it off for a few days, until we've made this gather."

"The weather either makes or breaks us," said Buck.

With clear Indian summer, they had a much better chance to gather the wild ones, even though the terrain was rough, steep, and rocky. But if snow came. . . . Buck did not like to think of that.

From the high ridges they could see the Missouri River basin below them. And in the distance, they saw the Circle 8 hayhands going out to work, driving teams to mowers and rakes and hayracks. They were small dots against the ageless distance, and if the atmosphere had not been dry and thin they would not have been able to see Pike Mooney's men.

"Three more days of good weather," offered Tin Ear, "and most of that hay should be in the stack, ready for use this winter. That Mooney man sure pulled us out of a hole, Buck."

Buck nodded.

The wind was stiffer as they climbed higher. The sun rose in the cloudless sky, and it held a degree of warmth, despite its low southern position. Bullberry

bushes and wild rosebushes and cottonwood trees became replaced by scrubpine that, in turn, gave way to spruce and fir that caused the wind to sing a murmuring song. There was a little snow there, but not much. And what there was was bunched in shady spots behind dead trees and piles of bushy debris.

Tin Ear slapped his arms against his ribs. "Ah shore don't cotton to this cold weather, Buck. If'n Ah ever get back in Houston Ah'm goin' stay there until this niggah dies, Ah tell you all."

"You'll never get back if you pour more water down my pants," grumbled Trigg Jones humorously.

"Ain't you got over that yet? Why, Ah'll wind you up, sure as hades. Ah'll—"

Trigg grinned and tapped his holstered gun. "The fellow that made this lead squirter made all men the same size, colored boy, and don't ever forget that."

Buck and Tin Ear took the outside flanks, with Buck letting the Negro have his choice as to east or west. "Ah'll take the east, Buck." Bill Tompkins would take the center position and Pipo Alvarado and Trigg Jones would work the inside circles. That meant that Buck and Tin Ear would have to ride east and west respectively. Then they would work south.

"Ride about twenty miles, Tin Ear."

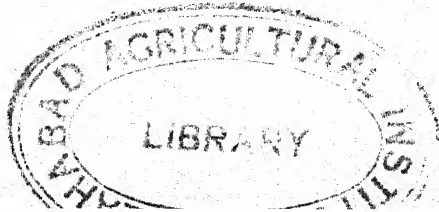
"Then we works 'em south, huh, Lieutenant? Fan out like an' get aroun' 'em an' shove 'em toward the river. We meets at sundown, then, along that big canyon we saw on the way up?"

Buck nodded.

The sun had reached its zenith and was swinging down. The northern days were short and were destined to get even shorter. Buck pressed his horse but the freshness had left the animal during the long morning ride. He thought, *We've got some tough work ahead of us and we have to work these badlands fast or the snow will catch us and when that comes it's all off.*

The wind had died down and the sunshine was brittle across the rocks, the pines and the foothills. He saw a wolf at a far distance, heading at a long lope north toward the mountains, and ten minutes or so later he saw the loper's mate, running a ridge with easy stride. They were hunting and between them they could run down whatever prey they hit. Half an hour later, he found the bloody carcass of a mule-tail deer. The deer had been run out of the brush by one wolf and into the hiding place of the other. They had ripped the hide from him and gouged out some of his bloody flesh and then continued north again.

This was a primitive land. Rolling hills and steep



slants, with croppings of bunchgrass around the bases and the gumbo side hills. Wild rosebushes and buckbrush formed a high foliage in draws and coulees. They wore breast-shields on their horses to keep the rosebush thongs from ripping into their broncs' shoulders and fronts. That way a horse could bust into the brush and probably not get scratched up except around his legs.

Buck could see Pipo Alvarado working the hills to his left. The swarthy little Mexican was a black dot, moving across the space and hills. Buck saw that the Mexican was working a few head of broncs toward the canyon. He had the right idea. He rode the ridges and the rimrock, hazing the horses south. He did not press them hard; that would have been too killing on his horse. He just let them drift and, if they tried to turn back, he would come out and head them off.

Buck lifted his eyes beyond Pipo, hoping to see Bill Tompkins. But the button was too far away, and Buck could not see him. However, he had his own hands full without checking on his crew. There were a few horses in that section and they were wild.

Good horses, he thought.

There were some wild studs, too. They would wheel and whinny a warning to their mares. They

would all come to life immediately, ears lifted. Then the stud would lope down, nipping and kicking the mares into action, herding them away from the rider who had suddenly come up on the horizon.

That was all right. That way, the stud would turn his mares south, unconsciously driving them toward the canyon where the crew was to hold its first day's gather. Buck would give them a warwhoop and they would drift south, tails up and hoofs pounding.

Once he ran a mountain lion out of some buckbrush where the lion had been stalking some mule-tail deer. The cougar came out on the run, bounding high in the air. He leaped from rock to rock, tawny and heavy and wild, and then got out of sight in the thick rosebushes.

Buck pulled his horse in, short-gun in hand. Then he changed his mind and holstered his weapon, watching the big feline disappear. The cougar had evidently killed a colt or two, now and then, but Buck knew he could not cross the Missouri River and get to his herds. Also, he and his men had arranged a signal between them. If any of them got into trouble—such as a horse falling and piling up on them—he would fire once into the air for help. Then, if that shot was not heard, ten minutes later he would fire again, and do this every ten minutes until help came. And if Buck shot at the mountain

lion, Pipo, his closest man, might think it a call for help.

When he came to a ridge, he saw his horses gather below him. A sense of defeat hit the rawboned Texan. He had the one stallion and about five other horses. Two were mares and the others were geldings.

The day had pulled down quickly and dusk was at hand. And mighty few horses were coming out of the badlands into that box canyon. All in all, they had about twenty head, and some of these were mares and useless on the army market. Buck pulled in his lass rope and rode over to where big Tin Ear Jackson sat his tired horse. His lips had a twisted smile.

"Not much gather, Tin Ear."

Tin Ear grunted.

Pipo Alvarado lit a cigarette. "We got some saddlehorses in there, though, Buck. I saw a couple with marks of old saddle-sores on them. See that sorrel yonderly? Mill Iron Brand. Must've jumped the remuda of that outfit an' drifted back to the wild bunch."

"There are a few more in there," Buck acknowledged. Despite the fact that they were in a canyon, the wind was raw and chilly and rather strong. With the night also were coming some dark clouds that

pushed above the rim of the canyon on the west. Buck felt cold and miserable and defeated. "Maybe we ought to call it off, men."

Tin Ear said, "Can't be long, Buck. Can't last long, Lieutenant. One good thing about misery: it can't hang on long." His battered lips showed a wry grin.

"Thanks," murmured Buck.

The giant Negro scratched his kinky head. "You know, Lieutenant, I done saw a hoss today I'd seen before. He's in that bunch, back yonder where he's hard to see."

Buck looked at him. "What are you talking about, Tin? You haven't ridden this range before this time."

The black man shook his head dolefully. "I done know that, Lieutenant, an' when this is over I don't never want to ride it again. Don't want nobody nor nothin' ever to remind me of these badlands. But this hoss—I've seen him before. Look at him over there, that bay colt."

Buck looked carefully. "That's one of our colts," he said in an awed tone of surprise. "Now what is that colt doing over here? I saw him three days ago over on Down Creek."

Trigg Jones rode up, his weathered face cold. "What're you jawin' at?"

Buck pointed at the bay. "Look at that bronc's iron."

Trigg twisted in the saddle, looked. "No use eyein' his brand, Buck. That colt came up from Texas with us. Now how in the hell did he get across the river into these badlands? 'Tain't right for a colt to light out and swim a half-mile or so just to have something to do or to take a bath." His faded eyes showed surprise. "You find him, Tin Ear?"

"Way over east of here, Trigg. Now that colt has been driven over here, sure as hell! But who drove him?"

Buck shrugged. "You got me. But we can't be wrong. He packs the Quarter Circle Lazy S iron."

"He musta drifted," concluded Trigg.

But Buck knew it was against reason for the colt to swim the river and drift into these badlands. Although he was weaned, his mare and the herd he had come into Montana with were across the muddy Missouri. And it wasn't logical that he would leave them and swim the river.

Bill Tompkins had brought a kettle and some coffee. They lit a brush fire under the sandstones and got some water from the water-hole. The water had a little alkali in it and was slightly brackish, despite the strong jolt of coffee he put into it. They opened

their saddlebags and hunkered around the small fire and took turns drinking it direct from the kettle. Pipo Alvarado drank first. He spewed the hot coffee out of his mouth and grimaced.

"She ees hot, *hombres*."

Tin Ear chewed a cold sandwich. "Never seen a fire that had a cold flame, did you?" He spread his big hands across the fire.

Trigg Jones shifted. He glanced at the sky. He had untied his blanket and pulled it around his shoulders. "Sure looks like snow, men."

"Hope not," murmured Buck.



ELEVEN

Jay Rolling and Jess Wyatt and Hump Quigley had pushed the stolen horses hard, driving them through the northern strip of Montana territory. They changed horses at outposts known only to them and to Deacon Stebbins, who had plotted this northern route and outfitted it, but who had never ridden it. They crossed into Canada and sold the herd at Wood Mountain to a buyer who asked no questions, who knew ahead of time what the horses were worth, and who knew Deacon Stebbins well.

"Here's two hundred apiece for you," the buyer said. "The rest will get deposited to your accounts in Deacon Stebbins' bank."

They had spent that night in Wood Mountain, a store and trading post set against the pine-dotted slopes of the Canadian wilderness. Next morning,

with the rise of the sun, they started south, drifting before the wind that came across Alberta province. Noon found them on the wide expanse of prairie that lay north of Malta, Montana, on the border.

They changed horses with a rancher who had fed up the broncs they had ridden into that section. They paid him for the use of his horses and he was silent, grunting a slight thanks. Night found them on the Milk River. They ate at another outpost, changed horses again.

"Herd get to Canada all right?"

Rolling studied the man. "Herd? What herd?"

The man shrugged. He hadn't liked the look in Jay Rolling's narrow eyes. "I reckon I never saw no herd," he said.

"You never." Rolling was abrupt.

They pulled on, hitting into the hills north of the Little Rockies. They intended to hit the place on upper Beaver Creek by midnight. This was an old line camp abandoned by a local cow outfit and they had a man stationed there. The wind was cold and dangerous and Rolling rode a heavy saddle.

The line camp was dark. Rolling said, "Hello, the house." A man came to the door, toting a Winchester rifle. "Rolling."

"Come on in, men."

While the man turned their horses loose, Hump

Quigley lit the lamp and started a fire. Soon the aroma of coffee filled the room. The man came back, rubbing his hands. "Aim to spend the night here, gents?"

"Too cold to ride on," grunted Rolling.

The man cooked sowbelly and spuds and they ate. They rolled in blankets on the floor and smoked cigarettes. Outside, the wind beat against the cabin.

"A fellow drifted through yesterday and said somebody was workin' horses this side of the Missouri River in the brakes."

Rolling nodded. *That would be the reb and his outfit*, he thought. He dragged on his cigarette and then pushed it dead against the dirty pine floor. He dozed, listening to Quigley's snoring. Jess slept soundly and Rolling was the first up. He built a fire and made breakfast. They got fresh horses and headed south when it was still dark. They rode fast, for this was the last leg of the trek.

Rolling said, "We got to drift wide to the east or this reb or some of his men might see us, and we can't afford to be seen together this far away from home." He rolled a cigarette. "I wonder where we lost that bay colt at, anyway? If we lost him and this reb finds him when he makes his gather—well, it will look like somebodys' been runnin' his stock across the river."

"Dark night," muttered Quigley.

It was past noon when they hit the Missouri, some ten miles below Duck Pond. The crossing was deeper there and they had to swim it all the way. Rolling was in an ugly frame of mind when they reached the other shore. They dismounted and emptied the muddy water from their boots.

"This winter," said Rolling. "And that's the last."

"Next winter," said Jess, "you'll be in Mexico, with Nita."

Rolling grunted.

Quigley mused, "Well, that's the pattern of life, I reckon. Seems as though all a man lives for is to watch out for what is over the next hill and to see what tomorrow brings."

Rolling glanced at him, surprised. A grin pulled at the big man's mouth. "You read that somewhere, Hump, or did you think of it?"

Quigley's glance was cold.

They split up at the eastern fork and Quigley lifted his hand. "So long, men," he said quietly. He drifted straight west, riding along the rim of the hills, and he rode fast. Rolling stirred in saddle and said, "Well, we finish another trip north, Jess," and Jess agreed in sullen silence.

The afternoon had gone far when they came into

the N Bar 5. They came down and stripped saddles and went into the cookshack, hungry and stiff and with the same wind coming against them with the same coldness. The cook swore and grumbled but still he had some hot food before them in a short time. They were eating and enjoying it—enjoying the food and the warmth—when Nita came in. She sat down beside Jay Rolling and took his hand.

“Your hand’s cold, Jay.”

Rolling said, “Cold wind.” He ate with one hand.

“How were the stock over south?”

“Fat,” he said. He speared a piece of bread with his fork. He let her still have his hand as he buttered the bread. “Some of them are drifting down to the haystacks on Down an’ Southern Cricks. We gotta watch them careful over there if a sudden blizzard jumps them.”

“I missed you.”

He said, “There’ll be a lot of those long, cold rides, now that winter is almost on us. A man can’t herd cattle and feed them sittin’ beside a warm heater chocked full of dry cottonwood and lignite coal.”

When the snow came, they could move the horses out of the country, and the blizzards would come along behind them, burying their trail beneath

snow and hiding all traces of their passing.

He went to the house with her. Minnie had a fire in the heater and she shuffled around, banking it now and then. Nita chatted of various things and Jay Rolling felt a weariness settle on him. He did not like these bright chatterbirds; he wanted them silent and with more character.

"You're tired, Jay," she said.

"I'll catch a little sleep." He went to his shack and rolled in, not undressing. He slept for two hours. When he awoke dusk was creeping on slow feet through the window. He glanced out. There was no snow.

He swung his legs around and sat on the bed and looked at his boots. Impatience was a brittle bird inside pecking against him. *Deacon Stebbins is down in Missouri City and I should ride down and see him and tell him we got back and that we sold the horses and lay plans for other raids.* But he knew that wasn't the reason he wanted to ride into town. Mona was down there and it had been days since he had seen her. She was what he wanted and he would get her. He was tired of pretense and sham. *We should get out of here, but I can drag down a few thousand more, and it takes money to buy a cow outfit in Old Mexico.* She was the magnet and he was the steel and she was drawing him.

He got to his feet and went to the wall. He took down the sheepskin coat and put it on and put his .45 in the pocket. He went to the corral, moving through the dusk, and his rope landed on a wiry, mouse-colored buckskin. He pulled the horse in and stroked his foretop.

The buckskin nuzzled his arm.

He saddled and rode out. He thought he was getting out of the ranch unnoticed, but he was wrong. The squaw saw him leave. She stood in her window, her broad, dusky face emotionless, her eyes on him as he left.

She turned, finally, and went to the living room. Nita was curled up on the couch, her legs under her. She looked up from her book.

"Nita," the squaw said, "I go hook up team. My sister in town, I go see her. I stay there a while—two day, or maybe week. You get along all right?"

"This is rather sudden, isn't it?"

The squaw shrugged. "I hook up team."

She went to the bunkhouse and got the mozo out. He hooked a team to the spring-wagon and helped her up. She was fat and slow, heavy on her feet. He said, "Damn it, you sure are a heavy thing," and she grinned at him in that slow, puzzled manner. Nita came from the house carrying a suitcase.

"I've packed for you, Minnie."

The squaw said something in Gros Ventre. She looked at Nita, bright and pretty, and then she picked up her reins. She had raised this girl and now this girl would be hurt, and it would be as though she were hurt herself. She had her suspicions, for she had seen things that Nita could not see—she had seen a man who was in love and she had seen that love turn to indifference, although the man had tried to hide it. She knew men and she knew the signs.

“Goo’by, Nita.”

Nita kissed her. “Have a good time, Minnie, and when I come to town day after tomorrow, I’ll see you. You’ll want to come back home by then.”

“Maybe I do.”

She did not see Jay Rolling on the road in, for Rolling rode with great impatience. He came in and left his horse at the livery and went to Deacon Stebbins’ bank. He climbed the stairs, aware of his impatience but holding it, and he listened to the violin inside—listened to its fine sweet song, low and clear.

He stood there, listening. The song fell and died. He knocked and said, “Jay, Deacon.”

“Come in.”

The cripple stood beside the far wall. He looked at Rolling and said, “Why didn’t you come in when

you first came up the steps?"

Rolling asked, "You heard me—? Heard me above your violin?"

"Yes."

"I listened outside. What was that song?"

"A lullaby. Brahms' Lullaby."

Rolling took a chair. It was warm here and the wind and the night were outside. He settled back, forgetting his impatience. He said, "Will you play it again, Deacon? A man can't shut everything from his mind."

Deacon Stebbins' eyes were bright. They were two men, deeply wrapped in the same crimes, and the same greed motivated them. But, in this instance, all this was forgotten—there was a violin and twisted warped fingers that still clung to their old wizardry. And Deacon Stebbins raised the violin. He laid his chin and cheek against the instrument; he moved the bow and his fingers took their stations. The hardness had left his eyes and there was grave-ness there.

The music came and Rolling lost himself in it. He thought, *A mother would sing that, or that would run through her mind, and she would try to put it into sound. . . .* He went back and thought of Mona. There was this cold barren land with its friendliness in summer and its wildness in winter.

There was this land with heat and with snow, and this land was strong and wild. Mexico would have *manzanita* and *malapai* and *chamiso*, and the days would be the same without variation, and cattle would rest along the water-holes, lazy and sleek and indifferent. This was what was ahead; it was part of his days, it was lazy and good and worth the effort.

The music died. Rolling stirred and said, "You have the world at your fingertips." He pulled himself back. "We ran the herd through. We just got back. The buyer paid us each two hundred on account and said the rest would go to you. I suppose it goes to the Great Falls bank and then comes over?"

"That's the usual method."

"When the snow comes we'll make more raids. We'll break them both for you, Deacon, and Missouri River basin will be yours."

"And yours too, Jay."

Rolling said, "I'll rod the spread for you, fellow."

Deacon Stebbins put his violin on the stand. He found a chair, lowered his deformed body into it slowly. "And Nita?"

"At the ranch, with Minnie. She said she'd be in within a few days to see you."

They were silent. The spell of the music had passed. Rolling got up and said, "Yes, we'll hit them

harder this winter," and went out. He went down the stairs into the night, walking with a measured, lazy stride. He stopped once and listened, and he heard the sound of the violin above the keening of the wind in the eaves. He went down the street and passed by the Tailholt Restaurant. Mona was behind the counter and she had some trade. He did not want to make his interest apparent so he did not enter.

A buggy came down the street, the lights from the restaurant falling across it. Rolling saw that the squaw was driving the team, and he remembered she had been at the N Bar 5 when he had left. He pulled back into the shadows and examined this move, watching Minnie drive the team into the livery. He stood there for some time, feeling this out, and then he decided there was nothing hostile in it.

He was standing there when Minnie came from the barn. She did not see him and he did not speak. She went into the Tailholt. He moved back between two buildings and went down the alley. He came to Mona's cabin, dark in the dark night. He knew where the key was hidden—under the second board on the small porch. He pulled the board up and put his hand under it and came out with the key.

He unlocked the door and entered. The place was

dark but the round wood-heater glowed in the darkness. He moved toward it, bumping into no chairs, for this place was familiar. He sat there and rolled a cigarette and smoked. Now and then he refueled the heater.

It was warm there and he was at home.

He dozed. Finally he came awake; he heard steps outside. The door opened and Mona entered.

He said, "Hello."

"Jay!" She pulled down the shades and lit the lamp. "When did you come?"

He told her.

"Had I known you were here, I'd have been here sooner. But I stayed to help the cook clean up."

He was seriously thoughtful. He had the impression, suddenly, that this was driving him, that this whole thing was becoming violently dangerous. Events were moving fast on the range and these were potent with possible danger to him.

"You should leave here," he said suddenly. "You should go to Frisco and then, with one more raid, I'd go to you."

"Let's do that."

He pondered that. "No, we'll stay . . . this winter. By next spring I'll have it made."

Her eyes showed no happiness.

16748

TWELVE

The Quarter Circle Lazy S hands barricaded the canyon's mouth with high brush, making it impossible for the wild horses to get out during the night. Then, rolled in the single blankets that each had tied behind his cante, they either laid down back under the overthrust and tried to sleep, or they hunkered with the blankets over their shoulders, and dozed in the raw northern cold.

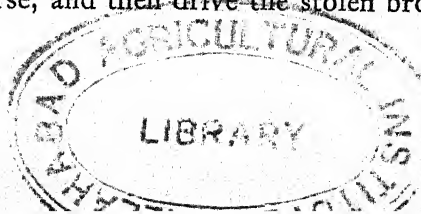
There was a moon, now. It hung like an orange ball in the clear, cold sky and it slowly moved across space to disappear. The wind died then and for an hour it was still. Buck squatted and dozed, glad that the wind had fallen. But the calmness did not last long. With the coming of dawn the wind came again.

A mare nickered in the canyon corral and her colt answered. Buck thought of the Quarter Circle Lazy S colt that Tin Ear Jackson had picked up in his gather. He was determined that the colt had not crossed the Missouri of his own accord. Some rider or riders had hazed him across.

Buck stirred, his bones cold. That meant, then, that somebody was stealing his broncs, shoving them north. And that this horse, he reasoned, had drifted from the stolen herd, probably in the dark when they did not notice him. For horse thieves do not strike in the daylight . . . they come at dark.

Pike Mooney? Buck pondered on the horse-raiser's true nature. No, he decided, Mooney had not stolen the horse; Mooney had his hands on the Quarter Circle Lazy S hay meadows, putting up Quarter Circle Lazy S hay. Buck disqualified the big rancher. Who was left, then?

Deacon Stebbins' outfit? . . . Deacon Stebbins and Jay Rolling? . . . Or maybe there was another element on this northern range—maybe there was an organized gang of horse-thieves that worked this territory. Buck had heard of similar bands. Riders who had relay-stations and fresh broncs hidden on the outposts. Riders who would steal horses at night, push them hard until they got to a spot where they had a fresh horse, and then drive the stolen broncs



even harder. These nefarious outriders had brand experts—men who, with a few strokes of a running-iron, could change a brand. They had market hook-ups for quick sale of their stolen horseflesh.

Tin Ear rolled over in his blanket, looked up shivering. "Man, I dreamt I was in New O'leans, no gettin' aroun' that. An' I was warm, too. Maybe I oughta go back to sleep and start dreamin' again."

Buck said, "We gotta ride light stirrups, Tin Ear, and keep one eye peeled for horse thieves."

The Negro nodded soberly. "And the other hand on our guns."

Buck got to his feet. His bones were aching. "Come and get it," he hollered, "or I'll feed it all to Tin Ear! Roll out, you horse nurses, and look at the sun that isn't up yet!"

Men rolled out of blankets, grumbling and swearing. They trooped to the water-hole and washed in the cold water. Tin Ear fed sagebrush roots to the fire and they had some more coffee with their cold meat sandwiches. They were an unshaven, dirty lot with little hope in their eyes.

Bill Tompkins held his thin hands over the fire. "When and if the sun comes up it might get a little warm."

Tin Ear walked toward the brush barricade, dragging the loop of his *riata*. "Ah'll shore show you

how to get warm, cold boy," the big Negro said. "Tangle with one of these loose-haired broncs and you'll keep plenty hot tryin's to keep your rear smack against saddle leather instead of sittin' on a bunch of buckbrush." The black man was pulling the brush away, throwing it behind him. Bill Tompkins went to work with great ado, and soon the barrier holding the wild broncs in their natural corral had been torn away. The horses circled in the small enclosure and snorted loudly.

"Listen to that sorrel snort," said Tin Ear. "That big boy sure am the hoss for this niggah." The sorrel lowered his head down among the other horses. "Look at him hide his haid! He's a saddle-broke beast, that fellow, and he's been in lots of rope corals, and he's learned hisself a few tricks."

The other punchers, ropes built into loops, were standing across the gully face, each trying to pick out a horse they wanted. Trigg Jones' lariat sang out and snared a big gray. The horse reared and Trigg pulled him in, grinning.

"I got mine," he said.

The commotion had stirred the herd and the sorrel moved with it, raising his head. Tin Ear's manila snaked out, held a loop over the beasts's head and missed. But another rope came in and snagged the brute.

"I got him," said Buck.

Tin Ear's face fell. "Pshah, now, an' I wanted that bronc."

Buck handed him the rope that held the rearing, striking sorrel. "I roped him for you, fella." He took Tin Ear's rope and waited, trying to find a horse that had saddle marks.

The Negro led the snorting, skittish sorrel down the canyon to where he had his saddle. The bronc, seeing the kak, reared and pawed, fighting the rope. Tin Ear slammed his weight against the rope and jerked the sorrel down. Saddle in hand, he started going down the rope, and the sorrel started fighting again.

Tin Ear dropped the saddle. "I'll fix you, wil' boy."

He untied his bandanna neckscarf and doubled it in his hand. The sorrel, setting back now that the Negro had dropped the saddle, finally allowed Tin Ear to come up and rub his nose. Soon the black man's thick fingers were massaging the horse's ears. Slowly he drew the bandanna down and soon he had the bronc blindfolded. The horse stood and trembled.

Tin Ear got his saddle and lowered it slowly on the horse. He did not want the animal to buck. The bronc would use too much energy bucking and, besides, he was soft under a saddle despite the fact he

ran in the rough country. Therefore the Negro wanted to keep him from bucking.

Tin Ear got the saddle down, squatted and reached under him for the cinch. His arm brushed the beast's belly and the sorrel brough up his off hind leg in a short kick. By that time, Tin Ear had the latigo threaded through the cinch ring. He braced one big boot against the horn, pulled the latigo tight, and tied it.

The rest of the Quarter Circle Lazy S cowhands were fighting broncs, too. Buck had taken a horse that didn't object too much to being saddled again. Of course, he raised a little fuss, but Buck soon had a saddle on him and was up in it. The horse bent his neck to buck, but Buck held his head up and kept him from pitching.

Tin Ear got a stirrup, slipped his boot into it, and got in the kak. Gathering his bridle reins in one huge paw, he reached over and untied the blindfold and took it off. The sorrel, his sight restored, jumped and, before Tin Ear could bring up the slack in his reins, the sorrel broke in two.

"Here goes nothin'!" roared Tin Ear.

"Ride 'em, cowdog!" barked Trigg Jones.

Tin Ear had his hands full. The sorrel was big and fast, and when he hit the ground stiff-legged, Tin Ear felt the jolt through his giant frame. But

the Negro was a bronc-kicker. The sorrel pitched, rolled, and split-bucked, but the big man held his seat, his rowels hitting him in the neck each jump.

"Buck, sorrel boy, buck! Unwrap them legs of your'n—"

Trigg Jones leaned back in his saddle and roared. "Look at 'im! He opened his big mouth and that sorrel side-jumped and there he is—flat on the ground, sittin' down! Hope he landed in a good big tough briar patch!"

Buck had spurred forward. He came up with the running animal, leaned on one stirrup, caught his bridle rein. He dallied these around his saddlehorn and pulled the sorrel to a stop. Then he led the struggling beast back to where Tin Ear was getting out of brush, a grin on his thick lips.

"Lemme hit that kak again," grunted the Negro. He stepped up again and Buck handed him the reins. The Negro rode the sorrel and then came back, trotting. "Now let's make them circles, men."

"And freeze to death," grumbled Pipo Alvarado.

When the sun finally did come up, it was low in the south and its slanting rays held but little heat. They all came in early at noon because their horses were played out. By this time their old broncs, rested from a few hours' respite, were saddled again. The herd had grown, but only a little. Nevertheless,

they would have to leave a man behind to keep it from breaking up and drifting, and Bill Tompkins drew this chore. He thanked Buck with a quick smile.

"I'll light up among the rocks and build a fire," said the tall, ungainly youth. "I can keep my eye on this bunch from there and I can stay a little warm while you boys run against the wind."

Tin Ear said, "Shore am lucky, Billy."

Pipo Alvarado grinned and warmed his cold hands around the pitcher of hot coffee. Trigg Jones squatted and scowled. "Not many horses, Buck. Maybe we can't make a hundred head."

"We've got to," said Buck.

They hit out again, moving against the raw, late fall wind—tired men on tired horses. The brush was thick and the slants were dangerous alike to horse and rider. Buck watched them with a silent admiration, a tug at his heartstrings. He couldn't remember when each man had last drawn his wages. Down in Texas, somewhere, two years or so ago, he guessed. Right now, he owed each of them a nice sum of wages. But they only asked for enough to keep clothes on their backs, grub in their bellies, and a sack of Durham and, now and then, a bottle or two. They hung to him with a dogged adherence.

Buck wondered if he were on the right track.

Maybe he should have taken Deacon Stebbins' terms and paid that high interest. But a stubborn pride had made him say no that day down in Missouri City. Now, if he did not get this herd, he would have to go down on his knees to the crippled banker. Pike Mooney, too, was broke. He could not get, and he did not want to get, any help from his bluff neighbor.

There were, he decided, only two courses left. One, to get these wild broncs, sell them to the army buyer; if this failed, then to borrow money from Deacon Stebbins. Deacon wanted this range and he looked to get it. If he could not get it one way, then he would get it in another. And he had an unscrupulous trailmate in Jay Rolling. Together they made a deadly team.

Buck lifted his eyes to the Little Rockies to the north. During the night more snow had fallen on those high, piney peaks. Even now a storm swirled around the cone of great Mount Baldy. And to the northwest, he saw the smaller peaks of the Bearpaws, set back farther to the north. These, too, had a little snow, though not as much as the higher Bearpaws.

He saw some wild cattle once. They had reverted completely back to nature. Interbred, they were scrawny, scrubby stock. Evidently they were long-

horned stuff that had escaped from a north-bound trailherd years before. They ran through the brush the way a deer runs—with their wide horns back, parting the brush with their muzzles. And they ran fast. Buck pulled up alongside a cow. She whirled suddenly, her horns dangerous and wicked, her jaws slobbering and her eyes wild with fight. Buck pulled his horse to one side, and rode on. The cow stared at him, horns low and moving, then trotted back to her late calf, up there among the rocks.

When dusk came, they gathered the herd. They were lower down the same canyon the men had spent the night in. They did not have a box canyon to corral them in there. So they decided that some of them would camp above the herd and the others below the horses. This way they would hold the herd. The horses could not climb up the steep walls and they would not run past the fires that blocked each end of the canyon.

Tin Ear Jackson and Bill Tompkins took the south point. Buck and Pipo Alvarado and Trigg Jones took the north side. Buck could see the small fire Tin Ear and Bill had built among the rocks in the middle of the declivity. He squatted beside his own fire. Pipo dozed against a sandstone, wrapped in his blanket, and Trigg Jones lay on the ground, covered by his blanket.

The horses, tired from their running, grazed on the short dried grass or stood hip-humped, rumps against the cold night wind. Pipo snored softly and Trigg Jones twitched, rolled, talked. Buck let his head fall on his chest as he dozed. Now and then he pushed sagebrush branches into the flickering fire. The night wore on and the moon came up and the wind died. Finally Trigg Jones sat up suddenly. He yawned wide and said, "I'll take over, Buck."

Buck murmured, "All right, Trigg."

They got fresh broncs at daybreak and rode out, with some of the horses pitching and bucking. This time Pipo Alvarado stayed with the herd while Bill Tompkins rode circle. When they left camp the Mexican was squatting beside the fire, playing a border song on his mouth-harp.

"Wonder his lips ain't too col' to curl aroun' that instrument," drawled Tin Ear. He rubbed his cauliflower ears slowly. "You know, I sure wish I had small ears like everybody else, 'cause then there wouldn't be so much of them to get cold, huh?" He smiled widely. "I remember that money I made prizefightin'."

"What did you do with it?" asked Buck.

"Bought a farm. Alabama. . . ."

"Farm?" Buck frowned. "What would you do on a farm?"

"Bought for a colored girl." Tin Ear buffed his ears quickly. "Don't recollect right now whether me an' that woman was married or not, but anyway we bought this farm . . . on my money. One day I come home an' here she is settin' on my friend's lap. I was lookin' for an excuse anyway. . . ."

"Who's got the farm now?"

"I don' know. An' I don' care."

The day was a repetition of the preceding one. A low sun and a heavy sky and wild horses and heavy brush. When Buck rode in at dusk he was tired and weary and cold. But his features brightened when he saw the fire there among the rocks. For Laurie Mooney, her face bright from the fire, was squatted there, frying something that smelled suspiciously like bacon.

Buck stepped down and said, "Hello, Laurie."

"Thought you boys would be hungry by now," she said. "So I brought over some cooking utensils and some grub. You have quite a herd, Mr. Talbert."

"Oh, I sure have, *Miss* Mooney. Now how did you get across the river?" Buck glanced at her saddlehorse. She had a packhorse, too.

"Swam it, of course. Nobody's built a bridge lately, have they?"

Buck smiled. "You took a big chance for to help

us sick waddies," he said. "That river is pretty treacherous, Laurie."

"There might be things—or people—more treacherous on Missouri River range," she said.

THIRTEEN

Almost thirty years before, this man had traveled under his real name, and he had stood on the concert platforms of the United States and Europe, with mighty symphonies furnishing the background for his magic violin. He had been young then and his face soft, and his friends called him "The Deacon."

When the tragedy had come, this man had been shut from his world, and a great hatred toward the world had developed in him. He fell out of sight completely, and "Deacon" Stebbins came into Missouri City. His face had been hard then, brittle and grooved by his tragedy and his physical pain, and the name "Deacon" was a misnomer potent with cynicism.



This day he had been restless, and even his violin could not satisfy his inner struggle. A great unrest was inside him. When he had been well and his fingers pliable and nimble, he had practiced long hours and released this unrest through the strings. Or he had gone for long walks along the city streets, or through the country, and walked himself into physical fatigue. Now, both of these were denied him.

He hobbled to the window, walking with great pain. His scrawny hands gripped the heavy drapes as he looked down on Missouri City's main street. Wind was sweeping along it, moving a piece of old paper, stirring the dust. But there was not much dust on the street—earlier winds had seen to that.

He thought, *Hell of a burg*, and that thought brought him to other towns, to other cities, and he did not want to think of those. He went downstairs to his bank and went to his desk, sat hunched in the wide chair. Business was slow and few customers entered; those who did greeted him with short nods, transacted their business with his clerk. From where he sat he could see the wind moving the dust on the street.

He turned in his chair. "Has Nita been in today?"
"No."

"Has Jay Rolling?"

"Haven't seen him."

"That young fellow should be learning something about operating a bank," said Deacon Stebbins. "I'm not going to live forever."

His clerk was silent.

The crippled man went to work on his books, his fingers slowly drawing figures. But the unrest was still inside. "Have you seen anybody in from the N Bar 5, John?"

"Just the squaw, Minnie."

Deacon Stebbins' forehead pulled down. "Minnie! What is she doing in town, anyway? When did you see her?"

"About three days ago, first. Then she was in the Mercantile this morning. She said she was in to visit her sister."

"I see."

Deacon Stebbins got to his feet. He put the cap on his ink bottle and put the bottle and pen in the desk. He arranged the articles on the desk in proper fashion, leaving it clean and orderly. He hobbled to the coat-rack and took his coat and the sawed-off shotgun that stood against the wall.

"I'm riding out to the ranch, John. I may not be back for two, three days—and I might ride back tonight. You're in charge here, of course."

"Thank you, sir. Your violin?"

Deacon Stebbins frowned. "No," he said at length, "I won't take it. Horse liable to fall and break it."

"Help you on your horse, sir?"

"The livery man will do that. He has to do something for his pay." The banker went out, moving slowly along the plank sidewalk. When he came to the livery-barn, the hostler was asleep, sitting with his chair propped against the office wall, his head sagging and his mouth open. Deacon Stebbins pushed the end of his shotgun barrels into the fellow's mouth and he awoke with a start. He saw the shotgun staring him in the face. He jerked his head back and bumped it hard against the wall.

"Deacon, you scared me half to death!"

"My horse," snapped the banker. "Put the side-saddle on him."

The man saddled a big dun. He pulled the double cinches tight and helped the Deacon up. When the banker was seated properly, he handed him the reins, and then stuck the shotgun into the saddle holster. When the banker rode out of the barn, the hostler was back on his chair, yawning.

The wind was raw and the sheepskin felt good around his scrawny body. He pulled the cotton gloves from the coat's pocket and put them on, jerking them over his gnarled knuckles. There had been a time, not so many months before, when he had

ridden a natural saddle, but the last few months pain had driven him to the side-saddle. The dun was young, with limber muscles, and he had not been stiffened from hard rides. He went at a fast, easy-riding running-walk, almost akin to a pace.

Low clouds were scuttling across the western horizon. He looked at these and thought, *Wish it would snow—that would stop this Texan*, and he looked at the Bearpaws. There was a little more snow than yesterday, he thought, and when he looked at the Little Rockies, directly north, he thought he saw a little more snow there, also. That meant it had fallen during the night.

He met Sheriff Martin James at the fork. The lawman was forking a light sorrel horse, almost the color of the dried, sleepy earth. Deacon Stebbins drew in and waited and the lawman said, "Howdy there, Deacon."

"Hello, friend."

James reined up. "Headin' for your N Bar 5?"

Deacon Stebbins nodded. "You're a ways from home," he said dryly.

James said, "It's a big range," and was silent. Deacon Stebbins rolled this in his mind and found nothing in it. He shrugged and said, "It sure is." James looked at the shotgun. "Well, have to drift on."

Deacon rode on, thinking of James. This man was big and heavy and phlegmatic, and though he looked slow and stumbling, he had seen too much of him not to know that James was sharp, and that his exterior screened a bright, quick mind. *And what, he thought, is he doing out here on a windy day like this?*

He lingered with that question, ran his mind over it. Finally he dismissed it. To the north, across the basin, he could see the Mooney men putting up Talbert hay, but the gate was open, so he rode in. He running-walked the dun across the newly-cut blue-joint with the smell of it sweet in his nostrils. Pike Mooney was sitting a gray horse, watching the mowers run.

They exchanged greetings and Pike Mooney squinted through weather-dimmed eyes. "Cold day for a banker to ride out, Deacon, when he can stay home and count his money in a nice, windproof safe."

"No money."

Mooney said, "If you're lookin' for Buck Talbert, you'll find him and his crew north of the river in the rough country runnin' out broomtails. Seems as though Buck couldn't see them high interest rates you showed him, Deacon."

"He'll come around."

"He's a Texas man," murmured Mooney, "and he's independent . . . even if he has an empty pocketbook. Me, I kinda wish I'd had a little of Buck's independence a few years back right after that hard winter. As it is, have I paid off the interest on that note, and have I finally got to the principal?"

"Never discuss business out of the bank."

"T'hell you say," declared Mooney.

Deacon Stebbins felt angry. "You seem to have taken an awful liking to this Texican, Mooney." He waved his arm toward the haycrews.

"A man has to have *one* neighbor."

Deacon Stebbins said, "I'll get both of you. I'll own this whole thing." He checked himself, then, for he had let his indiscretion run off with him. He turned the dun. "Good day, sir."

"So long," drawled Mooney.

Deacon Stebbins rode north toward the N Bar 5 ranchhouse. He saw fat N Bar 5 cows in the hills and he saw fat calves with them. The other stock also looked in good shape, although graze had been short that summer due to lack of rainfall. He saw some big three- four-year-old steers. Though most of his steers, he realized, must have been farther back in the high country to the south, because there were mostly cows and spring calves here.

The N Bar 5 was sleeping under the brittle sun-

light. Chickens clucked and scratched, for the folds of the hills cut the wind off at that point. Nita's wolfhounds came barking out to meet him. He spoke to them and they jumped against his stirrup, tails wagging. The stallion whinnied from his circular pen back of the barn. His eyes, trained to judge the worth and quality of an object, were quick to discern the condition of the ranch. The cattle were fat, the range in good shape, the buildings painted and up. Rolling was a good man, and he would make a good son-in-law.

Nita came from the house. "Why, Dad, I'm so glad! It's been ages since you've been out here!"

She helped him down and kissed him. "We'll take your horse to the barn. You're going to stay a few days, aren't you?"

"No, I have to go back tonight."

Her pretty face showed disappointment. "Well, we better give your horse some grain, then, and lots of bluejoint."

"Haven't you a man here?"

"No, they're all out on the range."

Deacon Stebbins didn't like that, and his thin face showed it. "Jay Rolling should always have somebody with you here at the house. I'll have to speak to him about that. Where is he?"

"I'm no hothouse flower, Dad. Jay's out on the range, I guess."

"You're my only kin." His voice was rough to hide his true feelings. "You're all I've got. Why doesn't Rolling tell you where he is going? He'll have to change some of his ways toward you when you marry." He looked at her sharply. "When is the date?"

"Next spring, Dad."

"Why wait until spring?"

"My idea," she said gaily. "I want to be a June bride."

"Oh."

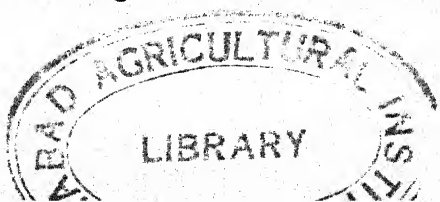
They went to the house. Nita had a fire in the fireplace. Deacon Stebbins spread his bony hands over the burning cottonwood. Nita went into the kitchen and put a pot of coffee on the stove.

"You want a drink, Dad?"

"No." He heard her uncork a bottle. "What are you doing?" He hobbled to the door. She stood by the table and she was putting the cork back. "When did you take to drink, young lady?"

"Just a nip, now and then."

He regarded her steadily. "I shouldn't leave you alone here. I should take you into town with me. Of course, you and Rolling are engaged, and yet some people are talking. You had better marry



soon. You had better tell Jay that; he's your man. This fall."

She was silent.

He asked suddenly, "What is Minnie doing down in Missouri City? Why isn't she here with you where she belongs? I hired her to stay with you, not to be in town!"

"Her sister is sick."

"I saw her sister on the street only the other day."

She faced him, her hands flat on the table. "She was sick and tired of this place, Dad. It does wear on the nerves, you know." Her dark beauty was like that of her mother and he felt it strongly. "She wanted to get out for a few days, I suppose. I can take care of myself."

He had not seen her angry for a long time. He thought and then said, "All right, sweetheart," and added: "How about some of that good hot coffee?" Men were drifting in from the range. They came in on tired horses and went to the barn. Suddenly he remembered that even the cook hadn't been on the ranch. "Where is he?"

"Took a day off and went riding, I guess." Nita walked to the window and looked out. She turned suddenly. "I suppose you know that Jay and Jess and a few others are stealing Quarter Circle Lazy

S horses and Circle 8 horses and running them into Canada for sale?"

He said, "What are you talking about?"

"I know what's going on."

"Did Jay tell you?"

"No. Jay may be rough, but he is a man. He keeps his business, dirty though it may be as in this case, to himself. No, I have eyes. And ears, too, my dear father." Her voice held cynicism. "But he's like you, Dad, only worse; you are greedy and you want this range, but it is still greater with Jay. If you get this range he will fight you for it. Your fight won't stop with this Texan and Mooney."

"He can have it. He'll be your husband."

"Maybe—"

He studied her. "What do you mean by that?"

She laughed suddenly. "Oh, Dad, I guess I shouldn't have said that, honey. No, we're in this too deep—you and Jay and I—and we have to stick together. I guess it was just the woman in me talking, and not my logic."

"I'm sorry you found out, Nita."

"Our secret, Dad."

He stood by the big window and watched his hands come in. They drifted before the wind, coming over the edge of the hills. Spurs jangled and steel-shod hoofs grated on the gravel. Smoke was coming

from the cookshack and the bunkhouse. The stallion whinnied and circled his pen, hoofs solid against the dust. The day's ride had only run the unrest higher. Stebbins ate with Nita and then got his coat. He said, "I have to go back to town, girl."

"Why not wait till morning?"

He had no imperative reason for getting to Missouri City that night. He could have spent a week here if he wanted. But he was lonesome for his room above the bank, for its comfort and security, for its smallness and the violin that lay there, and the memories that room held.

"No, I have to go."

"I'll have Curly get your horse."

She helped him mount and he left her standing on the porch. The dusk had come and the wind had died. Jay Rolling had not yet come in. Nita had said he was riding a wide circle and checking the steer crop. That meant that he would be south traveling toward the ranch.

When he came to the fork, he saw a rider coming toward him from Missouri City. Rolling came fast and stopped when he recognized him. He was big in his saddle and he said, "Why, I'll be damned, if it isn't Deacon Stebbins! Been out to the ranch, huh? Sure sorry I wasn't out there when you came."

"Nita said you rode to the south."

"Swung around into town for some Durham," said Rolling. "Was ridin' the Piney Ridge country, and that wasnt' far from town, so I rode in and got some smoking."

Deacon Stebbins remembered the carton of Bull Durham in the kitchen. Nita had said it belonged to Jay Rolling. But maybe the man had run out while on the range and that he didn't mean to imply he had no tobacco at the N Bar 5.

"See any stock?" asked Rolling.

"I saw some cows and spring calves. They were in good shape, the ones I saw. Also a few head of older stuff."

"Most of the older cattle are back in the rough hills," said Rolling. "They're in good shape, though. But I wouldn't be a bit surprised to find we run sort of short when we sell to that army buyer. Saw him the other day. He says he'll buy in about a month; he's waitin' for when it gets cold enough to keep the meat without spoiling."

"Why should we be short?"

"Injuns travelin' through all summer. They'd never ask to kill a beef or two. Multiply that by all the bands of Gros Ventres, Blackfeet, Sioux and Crows and you have a number of steers. Then, a man has neighbors."

Deacon Stebbins rubbed his nose. "Don't like to

think that of Pike Mooney," he said. "But this Texan is another horse."

"Never heard of a horse-raiser that ate horse-meat, have you?" Rolling was quietly studious. "Of course, Talbert—well, a man can't tell. Me and my hands have kept close tab, but this is a wide big range."

"I saw Martin James when I rode out."

"Oh." Then, "What'd you reckon he was doin' riding around this neck of the timber?"

"Hard to tell."

Rolling said, "Well, I should be pushing on." He turned his horse and looked toward the badlands across the river. "Had a scout over in the badlands a day ago. Seems as though that Texan and his hands are gathering stock. Horses, of course. And if they get them, the army will buy them—and you know what that means? That means hay for his horses without borrowing from your bank."

"Gathering a herd, huh?"

"Yes, he's getting them."

Deacon Stebbins regarded him steadily. "We can't let that happen, Jay. Get a few men and bust that herd to hell!" His voice was savage. "Do it tonight. Then, if snow hits pronto, they can't gather them again, 'cause you can't round up horses in snow-drifts."

"Tonight?"

"Yes, tonight. But you stay back, see, and let your men do the fighting. They're drawing wages for that. You're going to marry my daughter and I don't want you hurt or dead."

Rolling smiled tightly. "I lead my men," he said. "I don't ask a man to ride ahead of me. I'll run that herd out of their hands and I'll do it my way, Deacon."

"I was talking with Nita," said Deacon Stebbins. "Set the date, Jay, for this fall. She wants it that way. She's high-headed, like a hot-blooded horse, and she has to be handled accordingly. I know. I was wrong with her mother."

"What did she say?"

"She's tired of waiting."

Rolling's face was wooden. "I'll talk with her."

Deacon Stebbins said, "That's good, Jay, good," and then drew in again. "She knows about you and Quigley and Jess and the other boys, Jay."

Rolling regarded him. "Did she tell you?"

"Yes, just a while ago."

"How did she find out?"

"She wouldn't tell me. You didn't tell her, did you?"

Rolling said, angrily, "Do I look that crazy?" He was riled inside and he tried to hold this back,

but it was almost impossible. "She's snooped around. Well, she knows now." He sighed. "Maybe it was for the best, at that."

"Maybe so," murmured Deacon Stebbins. He was thoughtful for thirty seconds. "Yes, it is just as well—she won't tell. But marry her soon, Jay."

"All right."

There were a number of things here that didn't fit. And Deacon Stebbins, riding slowly toward Missouri City, was acutely aware of these parts. For one thing, Deputy Sheriff Martin James had been on this road, and for what reason? That was one part, and there were others, too.

He pondered on Jay Rolling. The man was strong, and he was secretive. Nita was impulsive, but she wanted Rolling. *And, he figured, he loves her, I guess.* He came in and left the dun at the livery and went to the Tailholt to eat. He said, "Hello, Miss Mona," and the girl smiled at him in her lazy way. *She is not like Nita,* he thought. *Nita is bright and quick and gay—this girl is solid and walks her own road and does it in her independent way.* He ate a slow, lazy meal, and when he left, he glanced around and asked, "Where is Mona? I want to thank her for such a good meal."

"She's out, Mr. Stebbins," the waitress said. "You want to see her?"

He said, "Never mind," and went back to the bank. He climbed the back stairs, walking slowly. The night was dark now and it pressed down on him. He thought, *Another day closer to the end and the pain will leave then*, and he wondered if that was good, and he decided it was.

He saw the dark shape sitting beside his door at the top of the stairs, and he stopped and asked, "Who's up there?" sharply.

"Me. Minnie."

"What in the world are you doing?" He put his key in the door and turned. "Were you waiting for me?"

V

The big squaw was cold. She was shivering, her brown face peeping from the folds of her shawl. A gaudy red blanket covered her beefy body and under this were heavy flannels that ran down to her feet encased in buckskin moccasins. They went inside together and Deacon Stebbins closed the door. The fire had been banked well and he put a little wood on it, but it was nice and warm inside. He lit the kerosene lamp and the sheen played across his violin.

"What is it, Minnie?"

She said, "I love Nita. Many years I care for her. I do not like Rolling. I come in town, I watch. He loves girl. Mona."

16748

He stared. His tongue came out and touched his cold blue lips. "What are you talking about? You mean Mona, in the restaurant?"

She nodded heavily. "That girl. I watch her cabin. Rolling come. He knows where key is. He stays there." Her head shook somberly. "I tell because I love Nita. Rolling does not love her. I listen by window. Mona and him they leave soon. Rolling smart."

"Are you sure?"

She pointed at her mouth. "I no use that." She pointed at her ears. "I use these." Her hand came across her eyes. "I use these, too. I know."

He hobbled to the window. He stared sightlessly into the darkness. Then he turned and said huskily. "So that's his game, huh. . . . You had better go, Minnie. And don't mention a word to Nita." His voice rose. "Hear that, not a word to her. She must never know—never realize—"

"What you do?"

"I'll find my way."

Her eyes were dark pools. "If he find I tell, he kill me. I go, Mister Stebbins. When this is clear—you send for me? I be at Dodson with my brother. You know him, I know. When it is well you send for me?"

"I will."

She turned, and he heard her close the door. She went down the stairs, moving like a black, heavy bulk. She came around the front of the bank and then paused. She listened to the violin. The music was wild, tempestuous. Shrilly, it hung across space, held her in its grip. Stormy elements were running across this crippled man, and he was pouring them into sound, into audible struggle.

She thought, *I go fast out of town on saddle-horse*, and went to her sister's place, for her horse was in the barn there. And when she rode out of Missouri City, heavy against her stirrups, she heard the violin again, beating against her ears.

The sound seemed to follow her.

FOURTEEN

After Deacon Stebbins had left him, Jay Rolling sat his horse in the trail, watching the cripple ride into the dusk. He thought, *So this is pulling up and drawing together*, and he had the impression of something sweeping across this land. He put the steel to his horse and loped toward the N Bar 5.

When he came in, the lamps were bright in the night. He stepped down at the cookshack and ate, with the cook grumbling about him being late. Finished, he put back his chair, turned a cigarette and gave way to thought. He was tired and cold and stiff, and there was only one thing—one person—that kept him going. She was small and somber, and her eyes were for him, and he knew she was the one. He let his head drop, and he dozed.

Nita said, "Hello, Jay."

He brought his head up. "Tired and sleepy, I guess." The cook had gone back to his quarters. "I saw your dad. Why did you tell him you knew? Why didn't you tell me first?"

"I guess I should have."

"You shouldn't have said anything before you talked to me."

"I'm sorry, Jay." She got to her feet. "Seems as though I get my foot in my middle lots of times, lately."

He said, "Sit down, Nita, please." He spoke quietly. "I'm a busy man, honey. Maybe sometimes you think I am neglecting you, and I guess you're right thinking that way. I have a lot of work to do."

"I guess I'm just a little girl yet."

He said, "Sit tight for a while. When this is over, you'll be the boss of this Missouri River range. Just have faith in me and we'll ride high horses in less than a year." He put possession in his kiss.

"Jay," she said. "What if the cook saw us!"

"What do we care?"

He had broken the edge of her troubles, and they chatted after that for the next hour, and sometimes he felt a sort of shame leading her on as he did. When she left, he went to the bunkhouse. He stood just inside the door and looked at his men. Some



of them knew about what was on this range, but most of them were just hired hands—and nothing more. Jess was reading in his bunk, still dressed, and with the lamp on a chair at the head of his bed. Rolling squatted beside him and talked, and then went outside into the night.

When Jess and the two riders came out, Rolling had his own horse saddled. He had a gunny-sack beside him. There was a bulky object in it. Jess and the two got horses and saddled them and they rode across the hills, going north. The lights were out in the ranchhouse.

"What's in the sack?" asked Jess.

"Dynamite."

For the most part, they were silent. Bridle-chains jangled and hoofs sounded now and then against the trail. The wind was whistling across the earth, whining through the buckbrush, bending the dark sagebrush. They wore sheepskins and angora caps, and two of them wore overshoes over their boots. All of them wore mittens. Two had tied their bandannas around their ears to keep them warm. Rolling and Jess wore muskrat caps with the flaps tied down under the chin.

Jess said, "Snow right pronto, Jay."

Rolling stirred in leather. "Cold country, friend," he murmured. "Too cold for man or beast. . . . But

we've been lucky so far—the snow has been put off time and time again, but this time it looks like the real McCoy.”

They rode on. They came down a slant, their broncs sliding on cold rumps. Jess said, “Theres’ a few flakes now. I felt some on my cheek. Not cold enough yet for snow, though. These were damp.”

Rolling said, “Maybe you spat out some of your own tobacco juice and it flew back and hit you, Jess,” and one of the riders laughed a little too tightly. They circled the hills, riding the gullies, following trails known only to men who had ridden a range a lot. Finally the Mooney Circle 8 ranch-house and buildings lay below them. Rlling said, “You men wait here and I’ll get him.” He handed his reins to Jess and stepped down.

They waited, hidden in the brush. One rider said, “Terrible night to ride out,” and was silent. Rolling came back, and Hump Quigley was with him. Quigley led a saddled horse with a rifle in the boot. He had on black angora chaps and overshoes and he had his .45 strapped outside of his mackinaw. He said, “Howdy, boys,” and got nods and grunts in reply. “Be a cold night—a hell of a night—to hit a river. . . .”

“Any night is a bad night for that,” murmured Jess.

The Missouri was angry, tossing under the wind. They crossed at Duck Point, roweling reluctant horses into the foamy stream. The moon was coming up, gray against the overcast, and the light shimmered across the muddy water. Rolling said, "Here goes," and rode in, horse fighting his bit and spurs. The others came behind, and when they were swimming, he glanced back, watching the dark line of men and horses behind him.

Then he looked at the water.

The Missouri River was full of undercurrents, boiling up at intervals. It carried tons of silt, coming out of the Fort Benton badlands. That silt could cover a man or a horse—in a few miles. And then a man or a dead horse might drift for miles and miles, rolling and turning in the undercurrent. *Treacherous as a woman*, he thought. *Or a man. . . .*

His horse swam powerfully, neck out as it breast-ed the current. His boots were full. He had taken off his heavy angora chaps; if he had left them on, they would have weighed a lot soaked with water. And if a man lost his horse and tried to swim he'd go down under the weight of the wet goatskin chaps. He felt his horse's hoofs hit the gravel bar, and soon the five riders were grouped on the opposite shore, emptying boots and checking guns.

"The dynamite?" asked Quigley.

"Held it high in my hand," murmured Rolling.
"Couldn't you see, Hump?"

"I was at the end of the line," explained the Circle 8 foreman.

Jess said, "I was scoutin' over here yesterday, Rolling." He poured the muddy water from a boot and put it on. "Damn, that's cold! Well, they've got the herd they need, all right—or close to that number—and they're holding them in a canyon this side of the Little Rocky trail. I was watchin' them through glasses."

"What else did you see?"

"Mind how we figured we lost a colt when we run that last herd of horses into Canady? Well, we did. I seen the brute in with Talbert's gather."

Rolling turned that in his mind and searched it for danger. There might have been some, he decided, but he did not know where it was in that situation. "That doesn't mean much, if it means anything. Of course, Talbert will probably figure the colt didn't drift across the river, but he doesn't know we hazed him there."

"What else do you know, Jess?" asked Quigley.

"Wish I had a cigarette."

"No cigarettes, now," said Rolling.

"Well," said Jess Wyatt, "the horses are in this box canyon. One way out, of course; through the

neck. Run them right over them Talbert hands. Scatter them right down the canyon—that dynamite will see to that. Scatter them over the mesa and they'll head out again, running like all billy hell."

"Snowing," murmured an N Bar 5 man.

The wind was moving in, colder than ever and thickening with snow. The snow was clinging to their hats and muskrat caps and across their shoulders. The rumps and manes of their wet broncs were filling with snow.

Rolling said, "Lead the way, Jess."

They strung out in single file, riding at a long trot. Rolling was cold and tired, but this was one of the big blows, and soon it would be over. Jess followed a trail that led across the hills, entering the badlands. And when Rolling glanced behind, he saw that the snow was already covering their tracks. There would be no hope of trailing them after the dynamite had exploded.

"Gettin' close," growled Jess. He pulled up and looked around, getting his bearings in the snow-swirled hills. "About three miles, I reckon. Like I say, they're in a box canyon. What do we do, Rolling?"

Rolling spoke clearly. "We don't want to get hurt—or killed—in this. And, for that matter, it might not be advisable to kill or hurt any Talbert

riders. Of course if they do come too close and you see a chance—" His smile was grim.

Quigley nodded. "And then?"

"We circle the rim back of the broncs. We station the dynamite in a couple of places and hit the fuses. This will be a hit and run outfit, and by the time those horses are scattered and the Talbert men are ready to take after us, we're across the river. . . . And that river hides all tracks."

They rode on. Suddenly Jess said, "We're there."

They left their horses ground-tied with rumps against the wind and snow. Jess led the way to the edge of the canyon. Rolling could see a tiny flame below, half hidden by the rocks. This, he knew, was the Talbert campfire. He could see two men around it, hunkered there, but they were too far away for recognition. He could not see the horses because of the snow, but he heard a neigh of a mare, evidently calling her colt.

"Probably figure on a day gather yet," he murmured to Jess. "Work one more day and they'd be out of the badlands with all the stock gathered. They've had a tough ride, and this will make it tougher."

Jess and one rider took some dynamite and Quigley and the other N Bar 5 man took the rest. Rolling said, "Now spread out and follow the edge of the

canyon. Two go each direction. Jess, what time is it?"

Jess said, "I can't see my watch and we don't dare a light."

Rolling felt impatience. "All right, just count to one hundred. Then when you reach that, let your powder flare. Quigley, you fire yours right after Jess does. Plant it under a sandstone and let it pile rocks down on the herd. Let's rattle our hocks, cowboys."

The riders went into the snow. Rolling counted mentally, and he was a little nervous. Time dragged on and the wind swirled the snow at his feet. When he got to one hundred, his impatience grew—the count went into the thirties again before the dynamite roared, sending rocks and flame up to break the snow. And, hard upon the roar of the first, came the smashing sound of the second.

Jess came running up, followed by his man. He said hoarsely, "We sure raised hell with that herd—listen to the commotion down there—they're stampedin' out of the canyon!"

Quigley ran in, his man with him. "We better hit back, Rolling. They might circle and come in."

Rolling said, "Hit it, boys."

They found saddles and turned, and he stood there. The fire was out below now, and he heard men hollering for horses. The sound of the running

horses was dying out, losing power with distance. Then, too, the herd was breaking, and it would need to be gathered again.

Rolling went to his horse.

He thought, *Well, they'll probably never gather that herd again*, and he laid in the steel, heading after his men. They rode fast and he rode fast, and there was no pursuit. True to his prediction, Buck Talbert and his hands were evidently following the herd, trying to keep it bunched. Rolling caught his men at the Missouri River where they waited for him.

Quigley murmured, "It went off just right, and now there's this damned river again. And a warm bed waiting beyond it." He was in the stream then, his bronc swimming, and the rest followed into the lapping, muddy water.

"Be rim ice by morning," said Jess Wyatt.

Rolling nodded absently. The one phase was past now, and it had worked out successfully. There was more work ahead and there would be no respite. Impatience was a savage spur that ran him on and on.

Quigley said, "Jess, Rolling!"

Jess' horse had played out. Rolling swam his horse close and took the reins. He said, "Don't fight him, Jess, but drop out and grab his tail. That way he won't have your weight on him. Get off

upstream from him or you're liable to float down too low and miss him."

They went in that way, with Rolling leading the horse who swam now and did not fight the water, and with Jess tailing him in. They were all wet and cold and there was only the thought of warmth ahead and of hot whiskey. Rolling took the bottle from his inside sheepskin pocket and it made the rounds. When it came back it was almost empty.

Rolling drank and threw it into the snow. The wind was driving harder now, sweeping sleet before it. It was steadily growing colder. By morning this range would be blanketed under snow and would remain that way until a chinook wind cut the drifts and melted them. And that might be tomorrow . . . or next spring.

Quigley said, "So long, men," and turned off and became lost.

Rolling and Jess and the two N Bar 5 men reached the ranch at about four, and they unsaddled and turned their horses loose in the corral, for here they were protected by the barn. About ten other horses were there, too, and the long manger against the barn still had plenty of hay.

They went into the barn, carrying their saddles, and they hung them up. The odor of fresh manure and the heavy smell of horses filled the place, but

it was warm. They took off their chaps and hung them over their saddles. They would dry in there. Then the men went to the bunkhouse while Rolling went to his cabin.

He had banked the fire well and the heater was still warm. He put some lignite coal in it and warmed his hands and legs, standing over the small stove. He undressed, hung his wet clothes over the back of a chair to dry next to the stove, and then he went to bed.

Sleep came quickly. He got up at noon and shaved and ate dinner. Hands were riding the back country now, watching that cattle did not get penned up in the brakes and starve in the high snow. They rode stout horses and wore mittens and heavy sheepskin coats. They had California pants and overshoes. They did not ride fast horses, for they did not need speed now—they needed strength and stamina in a mount. A horse that could bust snow all day and come in at night with still a reserve.

Nita came into the cookshack. "You slept late," she said.

He said, "Did a little riding, after the blizzard came up. Had to go down and close some pasture gates so the cattle wouldn't come into the haystacks. Took more time than we figured and we were out to darn near this morning."

She knows enough now, he thought, and she doesn't need to know about that raid last night.

"When will we have to start feeding?"

He looked out at the swirling snow. The wind sang angrily against the eaves. "If it doesn't hang onto the ridges, they can rustle for some time yet. But if the wind dies down and the snow piles up on the tops, then there won't be any feed and we'll have to take them in on the hay-grounds."

"I'm lonesome, Jay."

"Hasn't Minnie come back yet?"

"No." She frowned, and it fitted her prettily. "And I thought she would come home yesterday, too."

"This snow might hold her back. She'd have to wait until the storm fell back."

"I guess that's right."

The snow continued all day. When evening came he saddled a good horse and rode south; and when out of sight of the building, he turned the bronc toward Missouri City. Deacon Stebbins, watching from the bank, saw him ride into town. The light from a saloon fell across him as he rode toward the livery-barn.

Sitting there quietly, his shotgun beside him, the crippled man watched his foreman, his pain-lined face bitter with turgid thoughts. He got to his feet

and pulled on his black overcoat and went slowly down the back stairs, hanging to the railing to keep from slipping in the fresh snow that lay on the steps.

The alley was dark. He went down it, the shotgun hidden under his coat, and he walked over to Mona's cabin. The place was dark; the girl was at her restaurant. He had seen her there but a few minutes before. He dug and found the key and fitted it to the lock and went inside, shutting the door behind him but not locking it.

It was warm inside. The scent of a woman's belongings, the whiff of perfume—these came to him and he disregarded them. He brushed the snow from his face, letting it fall on the floor, and then he settled against the wall behind the door, his shotgun in his hand.

He did not have to wait long.

Boots sounded on the porch outside. He heard a hand pull up the board in the porch, heard a man mutter; then the board came down again. He heard the doorknob turn and the door came in and he felt a gush of the cold outside air. This stopped, and he knew the door was closed.

A man muttered, "She must've forgot to lock up," and he recognized Rolling's voice. *Minnie was right then*, he thought, and that thought made him

cold with anger. He heard Rolling walk across the room and then a match flared as he lit the lamp, his back to Deacon Stebbins. *He knew where that lamp was and he went straight to it in the dark, and that means he's familiar with this cabin.*

The match caught the wick and the light grew. Rolling put the chimney back on and turned, taking off his sheepskin coat. He saw Deacon Stebbins then, against the wall. He was quiet for some time, but finally he spoke.

"What are you doing here, Deacon?"

Deacon Stebbins said, "So this is your game, huh?" and he brought his shotgun level. His eyes were bright, glaring points. "Play along with my daughter to get into my good graces, and then have this harpy on the side!"

Harpy, thought Rolling. His anger was strong. The shock of seeing the banker had passed, and the word *harpy* had brought anger. "Damn you and your brassy little hussy," he growled. He came closer despite the shotgun.

Deacon Stebbins said, "I'll kill you, Rolling! You'll not get out of here alive! No man's turning my daughter over—"

Rolling felt the pull of fear. The cripple was crouched over the gun, his thumb on one prong, ready to pull it back. Rolling had his .45 in its hol-

ster around his hips. He got both hands on a chair. He said, "Hold up, Deacon!" and then he threw the chair, pitching it straight out for the banker's face.

The shotgun roared. The slugs tore up through the chair, and Rolling heard them go into the ceiling. He came forward fast, and twisted the cripple around. His gun rose eight times. Then he stepped back, listening.

Only the wind outside.

He put out the lamp, went outside, stood on the porch. Evidently the howl of the wind had assimilated the blast of the shotgun. He stood there for some time and then his heart jumped suddenly. A figure was hurrying toward the shack, pushing through the loose snow. His tightness left.

He said, "Mona."

She came on the porch. "I saw you ride into town, Jay. Why do you stand out here, though—when it is warm inside? I'm so glad you came."

"Deacon Stebbins is inside. I think he is dead."

She looked at him. "Yes?" Hollowly.

"I think so," he repeated. He told her what had happened. "Did you hear his shotgun?"

"No."

"Then I guess nobody did."

They went inside. She held him and kissed him.

He said, "Light the lamp. No, take the other one. The chimney's hot on that one."

She stood beside the lamp while he knelt beside Deacon Stebbins. The pain had left the cripple's face and the lines had smoothed out. He looked at the thin, gnarled hands, limp and without movement. He got to his feet.

She asked, "Dead?"

He nodded.

"What do we do?"

Quickly he thought. He remembered the muddy water, lapping against his horse the night before—he remembered the silt and the undercurrent, and how a man would roll end over end in the Missouri River.

"I'll carry him down to the river. There'll be a boat down there. I'll row out and then dump him in. Give me a towel, quick!"

She went into her bedroom and came out with a thick towel. He wrapped this around the dead man's head. "That will keep it from bleeding and leaving traces in the snow."

"Bring that back," she said. "It has my initials on it."

"Damn it! All right." He had the limp form in his arms. The body seemed light: this man was only bones, skin. He looked at the blood on the floor.

"Wipe that up. Mop the floor." He glanced at the ceiling. "We'll have to plug those holes where that buckshot went in."

"You get rid of him," she said.

She shielded the light so it would not show on him when he went out. When he was gone, she ran and closed the door. The snow was swirling, blinding; a man could only see a few feet ahead. The thermometer was falling steadily.

Rim ice showed along the bank of the Missouri River. The rowboat was tied to a cottonwood tree. He laid the dead man in it, untied it and kicked it loose from the ice. He rowed hard. A few minutes later, he was out far enough. He took the towel and crammed it in his pocket. Then, standing up, legs braced wide, he took Deacon Stebbins and put him in the surly water.

He did not throw him in. He let the body slide slowly. Then it was gone, and the man was down there, turning dead and limp against the water. He looked but there was nothing on the water beyond the edge of the snow, his limit in visibility.

He said, "*Adios*, Deacon."

He rowed back, tied the boat. There was no blood on its floor. The snow had already covered the tracks he had made coming to the river. Nobody would ever know he had used the boat.

16748

Mona had the floor clean. He looked up at the ceiling, made of slab pine. "Nobody would ever look up there," he said. "We'll leave that be. Now buck up, girl, and show some color. Nobody will ever know, honey!"

"How did he find out?"

"I don't know. Did you mention—"

She said, "Don't say that, Jay."

He sat down. He took the towel and handed it to her, and she took it gingerly and dropped it into the hot heater. She came back and sat on his lap and put her arms around him. She rested her head on his shoulder, and sobbed.

"Nobody will ever know," he repeated. "Only us two, Mona."

She grew quiet.

He sat there, stroking her back, with her head against his shoulder. Her hair was sweet in his nostrils. *The way is clear now*, he thought, *and maybe this was for the best*. Deacon Stebbins was there in that water, turning and pulling with the stream, and even now the silt and mud would probably be covering him.

He said quietly, "You go ahead and sell out your place, and then you leave and I'll come later and we'll leave the United States together. . . . But how did he find out, I wonder?"

"Maybe Nita knows?"

He considered that. "Somebody must have seen me come in some time. No, Nita doesn't know, or she'd have brought it out before this—with a knife in her hand."

"Then who told Deacon?"

"Maybe he saw from the bank. Maybe he was the only one who knew, besides us."

That brightened her. She looked up, wiping her eyes. She laughed shakily. "I guess that must be it. We have to act natural—I just can't leave. If somebody else knew, well—they might get suspicious of what happened to Deacon Stebbins."

"We'll wait," said Rolling.

"But what about Pike Mooney," she asked, "and Buck Talbert?"

"Mooney is an old senseless goat." He was silent and thoughtful. "But Talbert, he's up there. If he presses me, I'll have to kill him."

"Let's go now, Jay."

He shook his head stoutly. "No, girl, that would be the worst move we could make. I'll run the N Bar 5 for Nita. Hell, yes, I'll run it." He added, "Into a snowdrift and into my pocketbook."

They were both silent then, while the snow kept falling.

FIFTEEN

When the dynamite had exploded, Buck Talbert and Tin Ear had been squatting by the fire, with the rest of the men dozing. Then had come the flash of flame against the snow-laden night, up there on the canyon's rim. Following it was the smash of flying rock, the rattle of boulders roaring downward on the horses below.

"What in the hell?" demanded Tin Ear.

Buck said, "Dynamite, for sure," and started running for his saddled horse. The others had come hurriedly awake, and he hollered, "Grab your horses and get ready to ride! Keep the herd bunched as much as possible! No, there's no use trying to get up there at the men who did this! We can't waste time after them—" The horses were coming

down the canyon now, loud through the snow-filled air.

The others had mounted, and fanned out. The horses hit the brush barricade and broke through it, struggling over the fallen debris and tree trunks that the crew had placed to hold them in the canyon. One stud fell over a bunch of willows, skidded on his head and came up running.

Tin Ear's bellow was harsh. "No use tryin' to stop 'em by ridin' ahead of them, men! Ride the flanks and run them fast, and keep up with them. We'll keep them from bunchin', so help us." He doubled one big black hand into a fist and shook it up at the canyon rim. "Ah'd like to hit you, sirs, right—"

Buck heard the black man's bellow and a smile touched him. Then he was riding fast, disregarding snow and rocks, riding his spurs. Tin Ear was right. No use getting in there and trying to head them off. Only thing they could do was stick right with them until they got tired and quit running.

A rider materialized out of the storm. "Some of them got sidetracked down a gully, Buck." Bill Tompkins' voice was heavy with fatigue. "I couldn't run them back because I figured it best to stay with the main bunch."

"We'll pick them up later."

"Maybe," replied the youth.

They rode on then, heading through the snow. Buck's horse hit a drift, stumbled, and Buck brought him up again, jerking on the reins. Riders and horses were drifting by, ghost-like in the snowy night.

"Hey, Buck."

"Over here, Trigg."

"We're losin' some, Buck. But not so many. They're tired and they won't run—" The ancient's voice was lost as he went to the right into the snow. Hoofs were still pounding and the black backs of horses were bobbing out there, but the hoofs had lost their mad unison.

Buck listened intently to this sound, and knew that soon the herd would quit running. They had better slack up, he thought, and felt the power leave his horse. Their saddlehorses had been ridden hard and they were tired. He sent home his steel, lifting the horse hard with his spurs, driving him ahead through the drifts, across gullies, down stiff slants.

Pipo Alvarado rode up, face snow-splattered. "We got them—and we didn't lose too many, no?" The Mexican's beady eyes were hard with anger. "We sleet the throats of the Deacon men, no?"

"Think it was them, Pipo?"

"Who else could it be, huh?"

Buck said, "I guess you're right."

Thirty minutes later, they had the herd stopped and bunched in a clump of box-elders along a coulee bottom. The rise of the wall to the northwest cut off the wind, but the snow settled down on them. The horses tromped and snorted, their hoofs clearing the snow from the ground. After a while, they fell to grazing on the side hill, pawing for their grass.

Bill Tompkins rode up. He lit a cigarette. "No sleep for the wicked, Buck. Reckon we better stay with 'em all night until mornin' comes—if it ever does. Wish this snow would let up."

"It will," Buck assured him. "About next Fourth of July."

Tin Ear came out of the gray night. Snow rimmed his Stetson. He had a towel tied around his ears and his black whiskers had a rim of frost. "We got out with around eighty head, I'd say. That means we lost around twenty-five, don't it? Well, things didn't turn out so bad. Here comes the daylight, too. You don't reckon a man could go back there and trail them hellions what scared this bunch of broomtails, do you?"

"No use, Tin Ear. The snow covered their tracks. Hell, it was Jay Rolling and his Deacon Stebbins bunch. Deacon didn't want me to deliver these

broncs into Missouri City."

"We'll have to bust them gents apart, Lieutenant."

Buck was quiet. Then he said, "It sure looks that way, Tin Ear, and I wanted some peace, not more war."

"Gotta have war to have peace, Lieutenant."

Dawn finally came, gray and indistinct through the hanging snow-clouds. They turned the horses south ahead, gathering as they moved. Due to the storm, the bunch-quitters had not run far. They had been tired to start with and it was hard work bucking snowdrifts. They had started grazing on side hills where the wind had swept the snow away.

While Pipo Alvarado and Bill Tompkins hazed the herd toward the edge of the badlands, there along the north bank of the Missouri River, Buck and Tin Ear and Trigg Jones rode wide on the flanks, turning the bunch-quitters into the herd. But it was hard, dangerous work on tired, gaunt horses. They camped that night and built a fire. It was a miserable night without a let-up in the snow or wind.

Next morning in the gray early light they were in saddle again. And each man in the small crew—and each saddlehorse was tired and cold, weary to the bone. Suddenly the tiredness left and became re-

placed by caution. For Tin Ear Jackson, who had been riding a high butte, suddenly bellowed to the men riding below.

"Hoss-backers comin' this way, men! Might be them raiders comin' back! Hang close to this ridge and we'll storm it out with them!"

Buck and his men galloped to the pine-studded ridge, leaving the tired herd below in the coulee. They sat there, hidden by pine trees, and watched the riders coming toward them. Five men, riding fresh horses. Suddenly Buck scowled. "Them are the Mooney hayhands," he declared.

Tin Ear shielded his eyes. "This danged snow has a tendency to make my eyes weak," he grumbled. "Sure enough, Lieutenant, for once you're right—they are Circle 8 hands comin' to side us. Glory be, gents!"

They rode down the slope, and the Mooney men pulled in and waited. One of them said, "Comin' to help you, Buck. Can't do no hayin' with a foot of snow on the ground—got most all of it into the stack, too."

"Where's Pike?"

"Hoss done slipped on the ice and danged if he didn't land just so he busted the Ol' Man's left ankle. Doc came out and bound it up and he's home now. Quigley?" The man shrugged. "Reckon

he's at the home ranch with the men there, watchin' to see that the horses come through all right. We got a coupla men on your territory watchin' your broncs, too. Now let's haze these wild ones and get them on the market, 'cause sure 'nough we got a hard spell of cold weather ahead of us."

Buck told them about the stampede.

"Sure 'nough must've been them Stebbins' gents, you know that. Who else could it be, huh?"

Buck said, "Rolling will pay for that."

Now, with the coming of new hands and fresh horses, the roundup went faster and easier. Now men could hold the herd while others rode the circles. The wild broncs had had the edge taken from their speed, due to their graze being covered with snow. And they came trotting into the main herd.

Buck and his Quarter Circle Lazy S riders had been running short on grub. The Mooney men had taken in a pack-horse with loaded pack-sacks. One man acted as cook, and Buck had selected Bill Tompkins, despite the youth's opposition.

"Why'n the hades didn't that old pot-rassler, Weasel Gordon, come with these men? He ain't got no 'scuse for hangin' aroun' the home ranch. Me, I'm no soap-suds mixer; I'm a cowhand."

"Do you good," Buck assured him. "Learn you something."

He rode off, glancing at the herd as he circled it. The kid had been tired, too tired for a kid his age. And that was why Buck had put him on the pot-wrangling job. Hard rides and cold weather, coupled with sleepless, chilly nights, had taken a lot out of the youth.

That afternoon, a rider appeared on the horizon. Deputy Sheriff Martin James rode slowly, tired from leather. He pulled in, a gaunt, dour man, and looked down at the herd. His breath had frozen a hard rim of ice on his sheepskin collar.

"Gatherin' em, huh, Talbert?"

Buck grinned. "Hard work and cold work, Mister James. But aren't you quite a spell from home for weather like this?"

James shifted in his saddle, as though looking for a soft spot in it. "Been over on the east looking around," he said. "On the Little Rocky trail." He breathed heavily and thought. "There's something on this range, Talbert, and I'm pulling it together slowly. But it's like a blind man on a dark night; he has two handicaps. And you can't make a move against something you cannot see clearly."

Buck told him about the colt they had found. "He's been driven across the river, James. He never came across on his own accord. Somebody ironed Pike Mooney's brand on one of my colts. I

got a hunch it was Jay Rolling, working for Deacon Stebbins. And if I find out it was Rolling, I want first try at him."

James was quiet. Finally he said, "I want to deputize you, Talbert. No, you don't need to ride out from my office—you can be sort of a deputy at large. When you do see something suspicious—if you do—then you can make an arrest legally. Now who do you figure stampeded your herd?"

"Rolling and his men."

James scowled and rubbed his forehead with his mitten. "But we can't prove anything," he said. "And when you have no actual proof, then there's nothing the law can do—or anybody else, for that matter. If we could break the case—make somebody talk—get some evidence that would hold up in court—"

"Make you a bargain."

"Yes. . . . What?"

"When you need help—if you do get in such a circumstance—me and my Texans are ready to ride to you when you give us the word. We came up here to run horses and we're going to build our iron into a big outfit. But we didn't come to build it through smoke and blood, James. We want peace here as bad if not worse than you do. Remember that."

James thought. "All right, Buck." He turned his horse. "When will you get this herd into town?"

"Tomorrow sometime. You riding into Missouri City right now?"

"Headin' that way. Why?"

"Tell that army buyer we'll deliver these bronses by tomorrow forenoon." Buck looked at the herd below him. "It's growing since these Mooney men came on the job. We ought to have around a hundred and twenty odd head, at least. Want to light down and get some hot coffee at the camp?"

James smiled. "If I ever get off this horse, Buck, I'd never get back on—I'm that cold."

"Adios."

Buck watched him ride into the snowy distance. Then he turned his horse down-slope, riding slowly through the snow. He had the impression that there was a great puzzle here, and that it had lain unsolved for a long time. But now Fate and motivation were putting this puzzle together, piece by piece, little by little.

When would it be complete?

SIXTEEN

The squaw did not reach the Little Rock trail that led over the mountains and came down on the Milk River valley. When she came to the ridge, she was tired and heavy in her saddle. The wind was howling through the pines, and it had a frozen touch in its roughness.

Mingled with this desire for warmth and shelter was the thought of Nita Stebbins. She was deserting Nita, right when the girl needed her the most. For now Deacon Stebbins would move against Jay Rolling. And in that move, one of them—or both—would die. That was inevitable.

Both were proud, headstrong men. Both knew what they wanted, and each would drive after his goal. One was young, strong; the other old, crip-

pled. They would clash, and that clash was potent with danger.

And then, what of Nita?

The squaw turned her horse back. When she went down the slope, the hill came up behind her, and it cut her from the raw winter wind. But she could still hear the wind in the pines and spruce behind her. It sang a rough song of coldness and of cold lodges in the Indian camps. No, she wanted the warmth of a house and good wood, not the iciness of a buffalo skin tepee.

The ride to the N Bar 5 was too long, though. She would be too cold by the time she got there. She thought of her sister in Missouri City. She would return to her and spend the night there and go to the N Bar 5 early in the morning. The storm was growing stronger. Once she lost her way. Again she found the trail, then lost it. She came to a cabin in a coulee. The place was dark, for it was almost morning. She called in Gros Ventre, not thinking she was using her native tongue, and then she repeated the call in English.

There was no answer.

She got her tired horse to the door and slowly got down. The horse stood with wide front legs, his head down low to the snow. The door was unlocked and she went inside. There had been no fire

for a long time. She had no matches. She felt around the walls. She came to a shelf that held a lamp. There were some matches there and she lit the lamp.

A chain of wolf-traps hung against the far wall. There was one bunk with dirty clothing on it. Some supplies were on the shelves. There was a pot-bellied stove, too, and when she lifted the lid, she saw there was fuel inside it, ready for a match. A crumpled newspaper was crammed in under twigs and the wood box, back of the stove, was full of dry pine.

She understood. She had drifted far, and she was beyond the town of Missouri City. This was a line camp for some cow outfit. When a puncher came in cold and tired, everything was ready for him to start a fire. That was one of the unwritten laws of the cow country. When you left a shack during the cold weather, you left it in perfect order with the stove ready to go and plenty of grub handy. Soon she had the stove roaring.

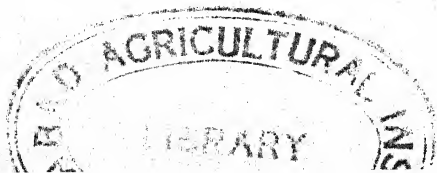
She suddenly thought of her horse. Sudden panic gripped her as she realized the beast might have wandered with the storm. She hurried outside. The horse was still there. She saw the barn through the snowstorm and she led the beast that way. The snow had drifted through the chinking some but there

was hay in the manger. She took off his bridle, slipped the headstall back around his neck, using it for a halter. She tied the reins to the manger and returned to the house. She rolled into the bed and sank into a sodden sleep.

When she awoke, the light was gray in the cabin. She lay there for some time, and then she remembered. She was hungry. The fire had gone out in the stove and she relighted it. She had forgotten to turn out the kerosene lamp and she did that now, moving quickly, for kerosene was hard to get. Barrels of it came with the river-boats, but space was valuable on them and they would rather have carried higher-paying cargos on their trips up from St. Louis. But the bowl was about half-full, she reckoned, as she shook it and heard the splash inside.

She ate of canned beans and she made some soggy biscuits. There was no need to hurry, for she did not want to go to Missouri City by daylight. When dusk came she banked the stove after killing the hot coals, getting it ready for the next rider to come to the cabin.

She went out to her horse and bridled him. Then she refilled the manger with the bluejoint hay in the lean-to. The horse was gayer but far from fresh. The storm was still on, but its fury had abated a



little. She rode slowly, moving through the gray wintery world.

She left her horse in the willows below town. There was a light in Deacon Stebbins' bank. She thought about going up and seeing the crippled man, then changed her mind. She would rest at her sister's and then go to see Nita in the morning. Evidently, the banker had not seen Jay Rolling yet—or had he? She asked a man who passed by, wrapped in a heavy sheepskin overcoat.

"You see Jay Rolling?"

"No."

"You see the Deacon?"

"Yes, just a few minutes ago. He ate at the restaurant and went to his bank. There's a light up there now."

"Thank you."

The man started away, then stopped and looked at a rider coming into town. "There's Rolling now, Minnie," he said.

"Oh, yeah."

The townsman went down the street. Minnie pulled back between two buildings. Rolling rode into the livery-barn. The squaw glanced up at Deacon Stebbins' apartment. She glimpsed the man there, gripping the heavy drape and watching Rolling.

She said, in Gros Ventre, "Oh, oh," and fell

silent. Fear was a magnet in her, drawing her close to danger. She went around to the back of the bank. Deacon Stebbins was coming down the stairway, gripping the banister, his shotgun under his arm. She held her breath and drew back into the darkness, and he did not see her.

She said, "I go get law."

But Deputy Sheriff Martin James was not in his office. She stopped a man and asked, "Where is law?"

"He's out of town. Been out for a few days. What is it, Minnie?"

"Not damn' thing."

She waited until the man was out of sight. Then she moved back and came to the cabin just as Deacon Stebbins entered. The banker closed the door. She watched, fascinated, fear eating her. Then she saw Jay Rolling coming.

Her mind was in a turmoil.

Rolling knelt, felt for the key. Frowning, he went to the door, entered. There was silence, and then the roar of the shotgun. She thought, *He kill him—Deacon kill him*, and that thought was good.

The lamp went out and Jay Rolling came to the door. He stood there and then went back in and the light came on again. She started for the house, then drew back as Mona came down the alley. The wind

and snow were whipping around her.

Minnie thought, *I get out—I get my horse*. She turned and went through the snow, fighting the storm. The wind whipped her breath away; she fell, gasping. She ran, stumbled again, fell. She lay there for some time. *Deacon Stebbins is dead and if Jay Rolling knows that I told him he will kill me. . . .* Her mind was a battlefield of conflicting thoughts that fought and obscured her sanity. She got to her feet. She was in the willows along the Missouri River.

She heard a man coming.

Lying in the willows, she saw Jay Rolling walk past, carrying Deacon Stebbins. Rolling loaded the man in the boat, kicked it loose from the rim ice, and paddled into the storm. She waited, her calmness back, her fear gone. Finally Rolling returned, banked the boat, tied it.

She thought, *He throw Deacon in the water . . . him dead*. Rolling walked past her, and the storm concealed him again. She got to her feet. Her horse was about a quarter-mile down the river. She ran until she was out of breath; then she fell to a pace—there was no need, she told herself, of hurrying.

She got her horse and climbed into the saddle. She rode east along the willows. There was no use going into town. There was nobody there to tell.

Deputy Martin James was gone. Deacon Stebbins was dead. She would go to Nita. She would tell her, and Nita would know what to do.

When she got out of sight of the town, she left the brush and rode across the river bottom, looking for the trail that ran along the foothills. She found it and put the horse to a trot, holding herself erect by hanging on to the fork of her saddle. The horse knew the trail and he quickened his pace. He was going home, and he traveled faster.

They came to the fork and the horse turned south of his own accord. Here on the bench-land the wind was stronger and it had driven the snow from the road, piling it in gullies and against the sagebrush. Not as much snow fell now, and what did fall was brushed away by the wind and hung against greasewood and buckbrush. Dawn found her riding into the N Bar 5.

The cook stared at her. "What the hell's wrong with you, Minnie?" he demanded. "You been spendin' a night with a ghost? You ride out from town in that storm, in the night? You crazy?"

"Nita up?"

"No. She's got company."

"Company? Who?"

"Laurie Mooney came over yesterday to visit her. Ol' Pike busted an ankle, and he got so danged

miserable at home that Laurie came over here for the night."

Minnie considered that, her face impassive. "That is good," she finally decided. "Those girls should see more of each other. They are the only two young women on this end of the land." Laurie could know, too—it would do no harm. "You just get up, huh?"

"Only five-thirty."

"Rolling, he here?"

"Nope. Prob'ly out on a line camp."

He still in town, she thought. That was good. They would get him there—later. "You not see sheriff, huh?"

The lanky man rubbed his skinny hands on the dish-towel apron tied around his thin waist. "You know, Minnie, I was married onct. Sure, look at my mug! Well, I caught a bride, see—or I guess she caught me. I lived with her too—reckon it was all of a week. She could cook and—well, she was all right—but she asked so damned many questions. Well, I'm single now—that is, if she got a divorce."

Minnie smiled. "I jus' been away for a few days. I ask question find out what happen when gone."

He poured her a cup of coffee. "Get this down that Siwash throat of your'n, an' it'll take some of the wobble outa your hands. Where's your bronc?"

"In barn. I put him there."

The skinny man shook his shaggy head. "You women beat all," he allowed. "Now why would a man in his right mind want to marry one? How about you an' me gettin' harnessed together, Minnie? You got any gover'ment pension or anythin' comin' in? You like me?"

"You crazy." She sipped noisily. The coffee was good. "Me no got pension, no have land."

His mustaches drooped. "I ain't got no luck at all, Minnie."

She drowsed over the coffee. The kitchen was warm and the smell of cookery was in the air: hot-cake batter, coffee, and biscuits. Men were coming in. They were grumbling and muttering against the wind and the cold. Minnie got up and went to the house.

Nita was asleep. Her dark hair lay against the pillow. Laurie Mooney was sleeping in the other bed. Minnie shook the girl awake.

"Minnie! Why, you're home! What time is it?" She rubbed her eyes and stretched. "Why, it must be early." The somberness of the Gros Ventre's stolid face brought her wide awake. "What is wrong, Minnie?"

"I hate to tell you—"

"What is it?"

Laurie Mooney was awake, too. She sat up, her

red hair tied in a net.

"Your father," said Minnie. "Him dead! Now be strong, and don't cry, please."

Nita held her fist over her mouth. "Minnie. . . ." She was weeping now, lying on her side, head against the pillow. Laurie Mooney was beside her. The red-haired girl said, "Be quiet, honey, be quiet," and looked up at Minnie. "When did it happen, Minnie?"

"Last night. Me only person to see it. Rolling kill him." She told the whole story in her broken English. "Him love this Mona girl. Him with her now."

Laurie said, "We better get the sheriff. We better get to town before Rolling gets away."

"Him no suspicious. Him think nobody see him. Sheriff not in town—I look for him." She was silent then, listening to Nita's sobs. "I kill him but I no have anything to kill him with. I kill him because him hurt Nita."

"Hush," whispered Laurie.

Minnie put her arms around Nita. "Me glad you here, Laurie," she said. "You should come before. Nita ask for you and about you. Men fight but girls should not fight. What we do?"

Laurie stroked Nita's hair thoughtfully. "We better get men into town and get Rolling. He might

try to run for it. No, we can't take N Bar 5 men. Some of them must be working with Rolling. You say you have seen them steal horses from my father and from us?"

"Me see that. Me no tell, though. Deacon, he in on that horse steal. Few days ago, I tell Nita. She tell you, last night?"

"Yes, Minnie." There was a brief pause. "We'll get Buck Talbert and his men. They're straight men and honest men and they ride a straight line. We'll tell them, and they can be in town until Martin James arrives, wherever he is." She swore at cow-thieves and horsethieves under her breath.

"Me no ride," said Minnie. "Me tired."

"You stay with Nita. I'll go."

Nita sat up. "No, I'll go with you, Laurie." Her tears were gone now. "Poor Dad, he had so darned much pain. Maybe it is better that he went, but I wish it had been peaceful. So Jay has this little hasher, huh? Well, I guess he can have her. I guess Dad was right; I should get out and see more people."

They dressed and went to the barn. They wore sheepskin coats and overshoes and muskrat caps. Punchers, getting their horses out of the barn, stared at them. And one asked, "Riding circle today, girls?"

"Sure," said Laurie.

Minnie watched them ride away. The snow had stopped falling and the world was a white crystal ball. The thermometer showed about fifteen below. She watched them until they were out of sight, her lips moving in a whispered prayer. She thought of the man in the river, moving and rolling with the silt, the current. Catfish and pike would watch him, then swim around him. He was crippled and bent with pain, but now that pain was gone.

She thought of his stilled violin.

SEVENTEEN

When the storm finally abated, Buck looked at the herd and said, "We won't wait until tomorrow. We swing them in today because there might be more snow. My men are tired and our horses are tuckered out."

A Mooney man nodded. "Good idea, Buck. We better pound them along, then." He waved his arm and signaled his men to push the broncs south. The circle riders came in, quirting their catches for more speed, and the herd rolled out of the badlands, heading south toward the Missouri River.

Buck's riders, glad that the roundup was over, yipped through cold throats, their lass-ropes beating the wild ones across the rumps as they drove them for more speed. The edge had left the wild herd and they were tired of bucking man and horse and

snow and storm. They came out of the badlands at a wild lope, kicking snow behind them as they trekked down on the river bottom.

A conglomerate herd. Roans, duns, sorrels, bays, blacks, grays. And here and there a flashy pinto—either black and white or bay and gray. A colorful herd of horses, but the army would want only those of a solid color; the pintos were taboo. Buck figured on using them in his own remuda.

Tin Ear pulled close and said, "About a hundred an' fifty head, huh, Lieutenant?"

Buck nodded. "Maybe a little over." He was cold and miserable, and yet he had a lift inside. This herd would buy hay for his horses. Soon he would have bobsleds running south to the Musselshell basin, hauling bluejoint for his horses. Soon, too, the snow would be blown from the ridges and his broncs could feed there. Things would work out all right, if there were a break in the elements.

He thought of Jay Rolling. And that thought was not pleasant. He had seen too much of man's hates, man's antipathies, back there in the war. But there was trouble here and he would have to meet it and conquer it. For if he didn't there would be no place for him here on this range.

They hit the river on the dead run, deliberately driving the horses hard to put them into the stream

in a hurry. The rim ice extended out quite a ways and it was slippery under the snow. Horses skidded and lunged and slid into the muddy water, breaking the ice under their weights. Soon the herd was swimming in a straight line with the riders upstream, holding the brutes in as straight a line as possible. The ponies strung out, swimming easily, and soon the leaders were breaking the rim ice on the south shore and wading out, water dripping from their bellies.

"We got to drive them hard," Buck ordered. "Otherwise they'll freeze to death now that they're wet. Turn them toward town and give them the works."

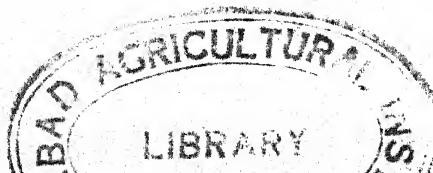
A man rode up and said, "Two riders coming this way, Buck."

Buck saw the two riders, coming from the south, and he and a Circle 8 man rode out to meet them. Buck had taken off his Colt and held it high while swimming the river, and when he had rebuckled the belt he had put it over his coat. But he took his hand from his gun as he recognized Nita and Laurie.

"Well, now," he said, "you two sure pick a fine day to go horseback riding."

Laurie said, "Buck, we were coming for you. Thanks be you had already crossed the river."

Buck looked at Nita. He saw the hopelessness, the



despair, on the girl's pretty face. But through it he saw something else: a tough, hard courage. He turned his glance back to Laurie, and liked what he saw.

"What is it, quick?"

Laurie told him.

Buck glanced at the Circle 8 man with him. "So that was Rolling's game, huh? Steal your boss' horses and mine and then also steal Deacon Stebbins' cattle. Or aren't you sure he did that last?"

Nita looked away.

Laurie asked, "Have you seen Deputy James? Minnie said he wasn't in town last night, when she was there." She was tired and cold. "It sure was a long ride over here. We left at sunup."

"James is ahead of us," said the Circle 8 man. "He'll get into town just about when we do if we push the broncs hard. Wish Pike Mooney was here to side us."

"I don't," said Laurie. "That old fool would grab a shotgun or anything handy and proceed to get his fool Irish head shot off."

Buck smiled. He rode close to Nita. He put his mittened hand on hers, there on the fork of her saddle. "I'm sorry, Miss Nita," he said earnestly.

She looked at him and smiled wistfully. "We'll see that things are run different at the N Bar 5 from now

on, Buck. We'll see that the N Bar 5 gets along with its neighbors. You can be assured of that."

Buck said, "You girls better go back to the ranch," and turned his horse. They laid in spurs and caught up with the herd. Tin Ear came in close, the herd kicking snow in his black face, and his eyes showed curiosity.

"What am it, Lieutenant?"

Buck told him.

"An' this Rolling gent am in town now, huh? Well, we better catch up with Deputy James, and this thing will be over soon. 'Member I'm ridin' 'side you all the way, Lieutenant boy."

"We've gone a long ways together," murmured Buck, "and I don't see no reason for quittin' now, Tin Ear."

Word was getting around to the men. Circle 8 hands were cursing, fiercely loyal to old Pike Mooney. They ran the herd north of Buck's ranch-house, following the river west, heading for Missouri City. Buck noticed that the Mooney hayhands had got most of the bluejoint into stacks. Snow was flying and the broncs were tiring. Riders pommelled them with hard catch-ropes across sweating rumps. The thermometer was getting lower, Buck figured.

"Sure a cold spell," he told a Circle 8 man.

The man spat tobacco juice. "This ain't nothin',

16748

Texas man," he said cheerfully. "This is just a little warm spell. Wait till it gets sixty below and when you spit tobacco juice it starts out a liquid and hits the ground ice. That's when it's right sharp weather."

Buck glanced back. Behind them, about two miles, were two horsemen and, unless he was mistaken, they were Nita and Laurie, riding into Missouri City. Buck cursed under his breath and remembered his father's cryptic advice about "nothin' a man can do about a woman but let her have her own way. . . ." But still he had a vestige of doubt. There would be trouble—and possibly death—in the pioneer town today, and mayhap the snow would have red splotches on it before the low sun finally sank in the southwest. And two women had no place in it.

"Hit 'em up, boys!" growled a Mooney man.

When they were about three miles out of Missouri City, Tin Ear came back and hollered, "I see a rider ahead a half mile, Lieutenant, an' it looks like he am that star-man, sir."

Buck said, "*Gracias, amigo,*" and loped around the herd and came to the point. He left the herd and caught up with Martin James, who was jogging along. James said, "Why, hello, Talbert!" He looked back. "Thought you weren't moving your herd in until a day or so?"

"Changed my mind." Buck's horse fell in beside that of the lawman. "Nita Stebbins and Laurie Mooney are looking for you. We met them back yonder—guess you just happened to miss them."

"Yes?"

"Deacon Stebbins is dead. Jay Rolling killed him and threw him into the Missouri. Minnie, the squaw, saw him. She tried to find you but couldn't, so she rode to the N Bar 5 and told the girls, and they came from there."

"Why did Rolling kill him—and where is Rolling now?"

"In town, we hope." Buck told him the rest of the tragic, sordid story. And the lawman's face was a study in emotion.

"Be hard on Mona," he said slowly. "She's a wonderful girl, Buck. I've seen her and Rolling walk down the street together but thought little of it. Where is Minnie now? We need her for a witness if Rolling goes to trial."

"He'll fight, James."

James was thoughtfully silent. "Yes, I suppose he will. But there are others involved, too, and that will break up this rustling gang I've tried to ferret out for so long."

Tin Ear came up and said, "What do we do when we hit the village, Lieutenant?"

"Turn the horses loose along the river. They won't drift—they're too tired. Then get your men and throw a ring around the town. You're the boss for that. Don't let a man get out or in town. The rest is your play, James. You carry the star, not me, sir."

James said, "You do as Talbert says, Tin Ear. Every one of your men are deputized, understand? Buck here—well, I swore him in some time back. Now don't go for any gunplay unless Rolling goes for his weapon, Buck. Then when you go for your gun go to kill, because he'll be going to kill."

"And if he's left town?" asked Buck.

"We get horses and trail him down," murmured Martin James.

Tin Ear said, "I'll organize mah men and do as you order, suh." He looked at Buck Talbert. "'Member, Lieutenant, suh, that I won't be far from you, and if you need me I'll be with yuh, suh."

"You've had that habit for a long time," said Buck. He made his tone light but the giant black man understood and smiled slowly. Then Tin Ear turned his horse and Buck could hear him hollering to the men, the sound falling back as he and Martin James rode into Missouri City's outskirts.

They left their horses there, for they did not want to ride in openly. A townsman had a barn there,

and they tied their horses to the manger. He had a bottle, too, and he dug it out from under the hay with, "Wanta little snort, men? The ol' woman won't let me keep it in the house so I hide it out here."

James drank. "Warm a man up," he said quietly.

"A short snort," said Buck.

James looked at the man. "You been up town today, Johnson?"

"Uh-huh. Jus' come back. Why?"

"See Jay Rolling?"

"Yeah, he was in the Mint. Not more'n ten minutes ago. Say, what you want with Jay, huh? And where is Deacon Stebbins? Nobody's seen him for a day or two."

James smiled thinly. "You're full of questions, friend." They made their guns ready and checked them and went out. They came to the one block of main street and Buck said, "We better split up, James."

"I'll take the front," said James, "and you come in the back."

A man came along the street and James asked, "Ike, have you seen Jay Rolling?"

Ike stopped and said, "Why, yes, he's at the Mint. I just came from there. Why, what's up?"

James did not answer.

Buck looked to the south. A rider was moving across the street, blocking the south road. He had a rifle across his saddle, and he lifted one hand and then he reined in, sitting big in his leather. Other riders were drifting to positions, holding the town under their fire if it came to that.

James said, "So long, Buck," and went out on the main street. Buck leaned against a building and counted to thirty. He had been cold the moment before but that had left him. He had taken off his mittens and dropped them in the alley. He leaned there and waited, and he thought of the girl in the Tailholt Restaurant. *This will be hard on her, whether he fights or goes peaceful.*

He moved forward then, toward the saloon's rear door. When he came in, James was in the front, and the star-man had his gun out. Rolling was at the bar, looking at James. The N Bar 5 ramrod asked, "What is this, James?" and then he saw Buck, and Buck saw the man tighten. He would fight, he realized.

"A murder charge," said James. "You killed Deacon Stebbins and threw him into the Missouri."

There were four men in the saloon. The bartender, who had drawn back and away from Rolling, and who was slowly settling down, dropping behind the bar for safety. And two oldsters who had been

playing cards on a far table against the wall. They sat very still and watched.

Rolling said, "Do you mean that, James?"

"Minnie, the squaw, saw you. We got her for evidence. Deacon came to Mona's house; you killed him. She saw you carry him to the river and row out and when you came back you didn't have Stebbins' body."

Rolling thought of Mona. And Buck, watching the man, saw the despair, the utter regret which passed across his boldly handsome face. He said, very quietly, "So that squaw—I won't talk, James. I'll come peaceful and I'll make you look like a damned fool at my trial—" He walked forward and James stepped back, watching. Suddenly Jay Rolling hollered, "Hump—"

The bartender hollered, "Quigley—in the side room— He saw you coming, James—"

Quigley stepped out, his gun talking. The bullets caught Martin James, and James almost dropped his gun. He said shrilly, "Buck Talbert—" and then his words died as Buck shot.

On one knee, he shot at Quigley, letting his hammer fall twice. Quigley screamed, and the color ran from his face, leaving it without hope. He turned, his gun shooting once, and the lead hit the floor. Buck took his weapon from him, turning it toward

Jay Rolling, and then the bullet hit him.

He thought, *That makes the sixth bullet that I've blocked*, and he thought of the War. His shoulder was gone and his gun was falling, and James was down and motionless. Rolling had settled on his haunches, his back to the bar, and he had his gun across his forearm, and Buck couldn't move his own arm and his gun was powerless.

Rolling shot again and Buck thought, *God, he missed*. He juggled his weapon, and he had it in his good hand, and he fired twice. Rolling was falling then, tipping forward slowly, bending as he went ahead. His gun fell down and clattered against the floor, and he went over it and lay there silent and without tongue.

An old man hollered, "Hold your fire, Texican!"

Buck said, "I'm out of bullets, I guess," and he braced his good arm against the floor, holding himself up. He thought, *My shoulder is broken, that is all*, and he got to his feet and Tin Ear Jackson came running in, his weapon out. Tin Ear holstered the gun and grabbed him and held him and said, "Lieutenant, my friend, are you really hurt? Tell this darky *no*, please! Tell him that, Lieutenant!"

"My shoulder," said Buck. "You're making it worse."

Tin Ear helped him to a chair. "You all get a

doctor," he told one of the old men. Other men were coming in and some had James on a chair. The star-man was groaning, and there was blood across his chest. Tin Ear came back to Buck. "The doc'll be here soon, and Ah've seen men shot up worse than James, an' I got a hunch he'll live, Lieutenant."

"Rolling? And Quigley?"

"They won't stand no trial." The Negro rubbed his huge, battered nose. "Ah reckon this Quigley fellow was in on it, too, huh?" He did not wait for an answer. "You know, Lieutenant, this fellow Jess was in town, too, and he tried to sneak out, and Ah worked him over some—that's why I weren't here sooner, Lieutenant. He was talkin', jus' blabberin', to the boys when I left, hearin' this shootin' here. We got this thing whipped, I reckon."

Buck said, "I reckon so," and he felt drowsy. The doctor was looking at James, and then they were helping James out and the star-man said, "Damn lot of thanks I owe you, Buck, for the help. Now you get well, Texan, and an old Bluecoat and a Gray will go out and get drunk some night. How about that, you danged ol' reb?" He was smiling.

"Me an' Tin Ear'll be there. Doc, go easy. That's been busted before. All you got to do is set it, I guess."

The doctor was swearing under his breath. "Crazy

fools, gettin' into a gun ruckus." Laurie Mooney came in and sat down beside them, her pretty face pale with the freckles standing out. "What're you doing in town, Laurie?" asked the doctor.

"Is he hurt bad, Doc?"

"He'll live. You and he will ride across the hills together in a short while. That suit you, girl?" The medico's eyes were sharp.

Laurie smiled. "You're damned right," she said.